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# JUDAISM

## **The Matriarchs**

*Pamela Tamarkin Reis*

*David E. Fass*

## **Argentina and the Jews**

*Allan Metz*

*Ilan Stavans*

## **Dan Pagis' Aqebot**

*Wendy Zierler*

## **Is There Afterlife After Auschwitz?**

*Simcha Paull Raphael*

## **Akiba: Sage in Search of the Messiah**

*Samson H. Levey*

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# JUDAISM

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In increasing measure, modern men are turning again to the quest for a worldview on the issues that are timeless — the meaning of life, the challenge of death, the purpose of suffering, the significance of the individual, his relation to society, and the goal of history. In order to advance this enterprise of spiritual discovery of our time this Journal has been projected. It will be primarily concerned with the philosophy, ethics, and religion of Judaism as a factor in the contemporary world . . .

We are committed to the proposition that Judaism has positive value today for Jews and for the world . . . At the same time, we disassociate ourselves from the dangerous tendency toward the hardening of party lines on the contemporary Jewish scene . . . The members of the Board of Editors belong to every school of Jewish life or to none. The trends popularly referred to as Orthodox, Conservatism, Reform, Reconstructionism, as well as others that as yet have no specific names, have their advocates among us, though no institution or movement is officially represented . . . Undoubtedly, our differences will find expression in these pages, but we shall be at one in opposing the dogmatism which takes for granted that one's own particular standpoint has a monopoly on truth and the authoritarianism which would suppress any contrary point of view.

*Judaism* will be dedicated to the quest for truth in the spirit of freedom. Our columns will be open to anyone who has something significant to say and the ability to say it well. New and unconventional interpretations, whatever their standpoint, will be welcomed from every source, for we share the conviction of the Talmud that "Both these and the others are the words of the living God." *From the introductory article by Robert Gordis, "Toward a Renaissance of Judaism" in Vol. I, No. 1.*

## *The First Reader*

### *When A Wife Is A Sister*

If there is nothing superfluous in the Torah, why are there three versions — remarkably, all in one book, and actually, within a few chapters — of the wife/sister theme? Such an excessive repetition of a pattern has, inevitably, led to questions: How did the wives feel about this deception? What were the political implications of fooling a foreign king? Was there a Divine plan underlying all of these episodes?

In “Take My Wife, Please: On the Utility of the Wife/Sister Motif,” *Pamela Tamarkin Reis* shows us the many reasons why the trio of versions are in the Torah. As she says, in her final sentence, “The three stories are not repeated by mistake.”

### *Zakhor — Remember!*

Without memory we are lost. We learn nothing; we know nothing; we cannot project the future. Usually, the working of memory is discussed in scientific works, in historical analyses, or in theological injunctions, as when God commands the Israelites to remember what the Amalekites did to them, and in the commandment to observe the Sabbath (as it appears in Deuteronomy), which includes the justifying words: “And thou shalt remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt.”

In “Footprints, Traces, Remnants: The Operation of Memory in Dan Pagis’ *Aqebot*,” *Wendy Zierler* looks at one work of this important contemporary Hebrew poet as he traces the Holocaust experiences of the narrator in the poem. This paper will probably be the first time that many of our readers will encounter the work of Pagis and, just for that reason, it is of value. In addition, Zierler’s perceptive analysis of the many levels of meaning in the poem has an almost sleuth-like quality. Detection and literary criticism are well teamed up, and beautifully rendered.

### *Hoping For The Messiah*

Rabbi Akiba’s claims to distinction are many. He is generally remembered for his scholarship (to which he came when he was no longer young), but he was also theologically motivated. A strong element in his



life was his messianic concern (not remarkable, really, in the century following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple). It led him to partisanship with Bar Kokhba (who led the Jewish revolt against Rome in 132 C.E.), whom he is said to have regarded as the Messiah, son of Joseph, the forerunner of the Messiah, son of David. *Samson H. Levey* presents us with a fascinating and multi-faceted personality in “Akiba, Sage in Search of The Messiah; A Closer Look.”

### *Is There Life Beyond the Grave?*

Is there life after death? In most cases, contemporary Jews would reply “No” to this question. Not so, says *Simcha Paull Raphael*, who shows that, over the centuries, there have been a great many “teachings and texts on topics such as immortality of the soul; celestial journeying through heavenly and hell worlds; reincarnations; exorcism of spirits; and . . . a wide variety of sacred writings on death and the afterlife.” Obviously, there is a great need among some humans to believe that physical death is not the end. “Is There Afterlife After Auschwitz? . . . ” is full of references, through the ages, to various beliefs about the afterlife. The paper concludes with a discussion of the topic against the background of 20th century rationalism.

### *The Second Matriarch*

Probably the most interesting of the Matriarchs, and, certainly, the one who is most active in controlling her own life as well as the lives of the men in her family, is Rebekah. At an early age, she decides that she is willing to leave home and travel to another land in order to marry Isaac, himself the weakest of the Patriarchs, who allows others to make decisions for him at major moments in his life. Perhaps that is why Rebekah must be as strong as she is.

She was obviously a personality who intrigued sages and laypeople alike — witness the plethora of references to her both in the Commentaries and in folklore. In “Unbinding Mother Rebekah,” *David E. Fass* brings us an abundance of insights into a Biblical woman who would undoubtedly be very comfortable and competent even in our day.

### *Jews in Argentina*

The largest Jewish community in South America is to be found in Argentina, where Jews have lived more or less (all too frequently less) at peace with the local citizenry for well over a hundred years. At various times there were outbreaks of violent anti-Semitism, the most significant of which was the *semana trágica*, the “tragic week,” in 1919, while, at other times, and for long periods, Jewish life was relatively untroubled. In “Reluctant Partners: Juan Perón and the Jews of Argentina: 1946-1955,”

*Allan Metz* traces the mostly cordial but tentative relationship between Perón, during his first term, and his Jewish subjects. All of the qualifications in the preceding statements are due to the fact that Perón was a benevolent, but pragmatic dictator, and one could never be sure just how he would react.

To complement the political picture that is drawn in the Metz paper, we have included in this issue a review-essay entitled "Imagining Argentina," by *Ilan Stavans*. It deals with literary creativity on the part of Jewish authors, from the end of the nineteenth century down to our day. The works of eight writers are discussed, thus adding considerably to our knowledge of Jewish literary developments on the other side of the equator.

*Asser Levy*

Who better than a descendant to write a biographical sketch of an ancestor who was among the first Jews to come to America? In "Asser Levy," *Maurits Prins* offers us a chance to look at his many-times-great-uncle, who was a good citizen wherever he lived, who battled with — and bested — Peter Stuyvesant (who was no lover of Jews), and who prospered throughout his life. He was a feisty character who fought against discrimination and who gained honor among his associates. He was not much involved in the religious life of the Colonies, but, then, he was an Ashkenazi among a majority of Sephardim, so there he took a back seat.

R.B.W.

# *Take My Wife, Please: On the Utility of the Wife/Sister Motif*

PAMELA TAMARKIN REIS

THREE TIMES IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS WE are told of a husband passing his wife off as his sister lest he be killed by those who desire her. In Genesis 12:10-20, Abraham deceives the Egyptians about Sarah's status. (At this point in the Bible, Abraham and Sarah are still called Abram and Sarai. I shall, however, use their final names throughout.) In Genesis 20:1-18, Abraham deceives the Philistines, and, in Genesis 26:1-12, the Philistines are again deceived, but this time by Abraham's son, Isaac.

To advocates of the "higher criticism," the triple presentation offers little difficulty. To these exegetes, it is obvious that two of these stories come from one source, and the remaining story from another. According to the documentary theorists, the redactor preserved all three tales, unlikely as their multiple occurrence may have seemed, to fill space, as a sort of editorial stutter, or because he did not feel at liberty to give one folk-tale preference over the others.

Traditional interpreters find the proofs of these source analysts shallow and arbitrary. All of these stories, orthodoxy maintains, come from one source: the mouth of God by the hand of Moses. In this view, each version teaches us different ethical and theological principles. Repetition is necessary and beneficial because we may learn by comparing and contrasting the stories, and because it is only with the emphasis of repetition that these principles are impressed and inculcated.

My position is neither the religious and didactic one of the traditionalists nor the linguistic and historiographic one of the source analysts. As the Bible comes to us as a single text, I prefer to treat it as a unified entity, and to focus on its literary and narrative qualities. At the supposed "seams" where source critics discover rough stitching together of disparate texts, I see, not fault lines, but gold mines of subtlety and allusion.

Accordingly, apparent anachronisms do not worry me. Source critics find it particularly telling to their case that in the second and third stories Philistines are placed in Gerar, where, historically, there were no Philistines. Orthodox apologists conclude from these stories that either there was a small colony of Philistines in Gerar at that time, or that the inhabitants of Gerar were the ethnic precursors of the Phi-

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PAMELA TAMARKIN REIS is an independent scholar living in Branford, CT.



listines, and might just as well be called by that name. To me, the statement that Abraham and Isaac encountered Philistines is of great narrative significance, as will be shown, and it was brilliant of the author (or redactor as I shall call him) to make it, anachronism or no.

Similarly, I am not troubled by a detail such as Sarah's age in the chronology of the first two stories. Documentary hypothesis argues the haphazard insertion of these stories by observing that Sarah is sixty-five the first time her honor is placed in jeopardy, and ninety the second time. Since she could not have been the object of Egyptian and Philistine desire at these ages, the stories must be clumsy interpolations. Orthodoxy maintains that Sarah's beauty was so sublime that even at ninety she retained her freshness and pulchritude. I find the threat to Sarah's virtue and, particularly, the temporary Egyptian and Philistine possession of Abraham's greatest treasure, his wife, a literary necessity, and so her years are not a critical factor. Besides, as shall be seen, that she is a woman of a certain age serves the redactor's intention to make these stories amusing.

From my literary perspective I see coherence, integrity, and intent in this thrice-told tale. All three stories function to explain the subsequent motivations of the individuals and nations involved, and to reveal the inner objectives of persons whose actions will be described centuries hence. Like an operatic overture, the wife/sister narratives refer to melodies that we must wait to hear developed fully. Though the stories are comic, and repetition heightens their humor, each has serious ramifications. I shall argue that it is necessary for the redactor to tell three nearly identical stories, for each of them is analogous to events that will occur later in the text. The later stories shed light on one another, but the reader would not connect them without the clue provided by the obvious similarity of their corresponding wife/sister counterparts. The purpose of this paper is to show how the wife/sister motif is utilized to further and to enhance the narrative on the political, the domestic, and the theological levels immediately, as well as over a long time span.

### *The Joke*

My title suggests an old joke. The wife/sister stories are even older jokes — dangerous, blameworthy, practical jokes. Abraham is a clever and successful strategist who manages, with his wit and considerable help from God, to turn the tables on his powerful adversaries and to leave their respective towns with his life, his unsullied wife, and his host's bounty.

When Abraham asks his wife to pass herself off as his sister, he says, "Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister; that it may be well with me for thy sake, and that my soul may live because of thee" (Gen. 12:13). Traditional interpreters as well as non-religious readers recoil

from the hint that Abraham plans to enrich himself from the bride-price which he will get for his wife. They explain, "that it may be well with me for thy sake," does not refer to doing well in the financial sense, but means only that Abraham needs to stay alive so that he can somehow protect Sarah from the depredations of the Egyptians. Therefore, the phrase, "that it may be well with me," is the exact equivalent of "that my soul may live." However, they cannot supply a more scrupulous sounding equivalent for the repetition of the phrase in the description of the transaction that Pharaoh and Abraham make, "and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. and he dealt well with Abram for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and she-asses, and camels" (Gen. 12:15-16). To the ancient reader, I am convinced, this shady deal was funny. Pharaoh, more fool he, is paying all that livestock and those servants for a woman who is not even a virgin — and no spring chicken into the bargain.

Another example of this order of humor may be found in Exodus 2:9, in which we are told that Pharaoh's daughter pays Moses' mother wages to nurse him. The Hebrews were slaves, after all; to require her to nurse without compensation would have seemed more appropriate. The reader derives ironic enjoyment from the fact that the mother is paid to nurse her own baby. The humor celebrates the minor victory of the victim over the oppressor. When the Hebrew slaves are finally expelled from Egypt, there is a similarly "amusing" reversal of fortune (Ex. 12:35-36), and the Israelites walk away rich from four hundred years of slavery, just as God foretold in Genesis 15:14.

Ancient readers revelled in stories of victim turned victor, and had an earthy appreciation of the comedic element in Abraham's shrewd gambles. The humor is stressed even more in the second wife/sister tale. We see Abimelech, King of the Philistines, make the same bad deal as Pharaoh; we observe him trying to claim a little more innocence than God will allow (20:5-6), and we witness Abraham's embarrassed, untruthful, bumbling justifications for his deception. Inside of three sentences, he catches himself in a lie; in the first sentence he says that he feared the people in *this* place, and in the third sentence he admits that he had asked Sarah to lie about their relationship *every* place they should come. And he fields an excuse so beside the point that Abimelech's blood pressure must have sky-rocketed: Abraham says that Sarah is, indeed, his sister, his half-sister on his father's side (20:11-13). To Abimelech, whose entire household is barren because he has taken this man's wife, it does not matter if she is also his cousin, his aunt, and his grandmother. She is Abraham's wife, and God is wroth. Abimelech does not let the half-truth pass, but says sarcastically to Sarah, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver" (20:16). Abraham's defensive fumbling in response to Abimelech's anger sounds like an adolescent making inept excuses for a careless accident with

the family car: "It wasn't me driving. And, anyway, it's not your car; it's registered in Mom's name. Besides, I was really driving slow."

Unpalatable as Abraham's tricks are to more modern tastes, they serve to illuminate his character. Some exegetes have said that Abraham showed little faith in God by going down to Egypt in the face of the famine; he should have stayed in Canaan and relied upon God to feed his family, servants, and flocks. But Abraham shows great faith in God. He risks his life and his wife's honor on his trust that God would fulfill His promises in Genesis 12:1-2, 7 and 17:19. Before the sojourn in Egypt, God had promised Abraham offspring. Surely, He will not permit Pharaoh to retain Sarah, for, if He did, whence would this offspring come? By the time of the second wife/sister story, Abraham has a son by Hagar, but God has promised him a son by Sarah as well: therefore, somehow, God will preserve Sarah from the lust of Abimelech.

To be certain that the reader understands that Abraham is a trickster rather than a cowardly and rapacious man, the redactor tells us the story of Abraham's rescue of Lot soon after Abraham leaves Egypt. Abraham's physical courage is evidenced by his unhesitating campaign to retrieve his nephew from captivity. When Abraham is offered the spoils of victory by the King of Sodom, and refuses to take so much as a shoelace from him, we see that Abraham is not greedily ambitious for wealth (14:12-23). He will not be enriched by the likes of the King of Sodom simply because they happen to be on the same side of a just cause, but he is willing to enrich himself by defeating those who would tyrannize him — Pharaoh and Abimelech.

### *The National Level*

A practical joke does not seem funny to the butt of it nor to other participants who may be hurt by it. The Egyptians and the Philistines never forgive the Hebrews for what Abraham and Isaac did, and the political consequences of their acts reverberate across the centuries. The patriarchs engendered lasting enmities for doing "deeds . . . that ought not to be done" (Gen. 20:9).

The events leading to the Exodus are a paradigm of the first wife/sister tale. All of the salient circumstances of Abraham's prank on Pharaoh echo in the account of Joseph's descendants in Egypt. Just as Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt because of famine, so does Joseph's family. Pharaoh takes Sarah, Abraham's most precious possession, and a later Pharaoh enslaves and keeps Israel, a people precious to God. In both stories, the captives are not released until God smites Pharaoh with plagues. In both stories, the Hebrews leave Egypt with Egyptian wealth. The tune we first hear in Genesis is repeated in Exodus.

When the Israelites escaped from Egypt, God did not lead them through "the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God

said: 'Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt'" (Ex. 13:17). Once again, the mention of Philistines in this time and in this place raises the source critics' charge of anachronism. Traditional interpreters wonder, to which war does God refer? I believe that the redactor names the Philistines here to pick up the old melody and play out an old hatred. They would have attacked the Israelites in commemoration of Abraham and Isaac's centuries-old transgressions.

The Bible does not record God's opinion of Abraham and Isaac's ploy, but, extrapolating from later evidence, we may assume some degree of silent sympathy for the Egyptians and the Philistines. Again and again in Scripture, God commands the Israelites to show no mercy and utterly destroy the peoples with whom they contend. The Moabites and the Ammonites are spared this judgment because they descend from the incestuous children of Lot (Gen. 19:37-38); the Israelites are told not to abhor the Edomites because they descend from Esau (Deut. 23:8); however, the unrelated Amalekites, Zidonians, Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and Girgashites are all sentenced to extermination (Ex. 17:14, I Sam. 15:3, Ezek. 28:21-22, Deut. 20:17, Ex. 23:23-24, Deut. 7:1-2). Only the Egyptians and the Philistines, despite four hundred years of oppression on the one hand and generations of war on the other, are not designated for obliteration. They had been wronged by the Hebrews and have a right to their hereditary hatred.

### *The Domestic Level*

The wife/sister stories have domestic as well as national repercussions. Sarah and Rebecca are not the targets of the trick, but they, too, are hurt. Their chastity is not profaned, but their honor is certainly violated: they are forced to assent to a lie. In the first and third stories, their silence implies their consent; in the second story, Abimelech reports that Sarah told him, "He is my brother" (Gen. 20:5). Abraham's genealogical explanation, furious though it must have made Abimelech, serves to validate Sarah's assertion. Abraham's regard for Sarah is such that he will not let her be considered a bald-faced liar. Yet, neither Abraham's nor Isaac's regard for their wives extends to a real concern for their self-esteem.

How does a woman feel when her husband's survival plan is to sell her to the king? Even if Abraham and Isaac have perfect faith in the providence of God, surely their wives feel devalued, shamed, frightened, and angry. Doesn't he love me? Couldn't he have thought of something else? Why did we even have to come to Egypt/Gerar? Of course they want their husbands to live, but must the men's lives be bought with the risk that each woman might spend the rest of her

life in the ruler's harem — in Rebecca's case, never to see her children again? They both agree to pay the price, but, in the economy of marriage, in the *quid pro quo* of human relationships, their husbands owe them. And Sarah and Rebecca collect.

In Genesis 12:11-13, when Abraham asks Sarah to let him pass her off as his sister to the Egyptians, he uses a particular form of supplication. He says, in Hebrew, "*Hinai-na*" (Behold, I pray thee), to point out the peril of her beauty and the Egyptians' lasciviousness, and he repeats the participle of entreaty, "*na*" (I pray thee), in making his request. Sarah uses exactly the same formula in appealing to Abraham to father a child by her maid. She says "*Hinai-na*," and points out that the Lord has not allowed her to bear children; then she says "*na*" and makes her plea for Abraham to have sexual relations with Hagar (Gen. 16:2). The duplication in language signals the reciprocity to the reader; having granted a favor, Sarah now asks for a favor in return.

Abraham's compliance was successful, as far as he was concerned, but it was disastrous to Sarah's scheme. As soon as Hagar was confident in her pregnancy, "her mistress was despised in her eyes" (16:4). The Hebrew root translated as "despised" means not only dishonored, held in contempt, and lightly esteemed, but it also has the sexual connotation of female wantonness (Jer. 13:26, Nahum 3:5). Why should not Hagar esteem Sarah lightly? Hagar saw Abraham hold her lightly, and Sarah can be taunted with that disgrace, derided for living a lie, and perhaps even smeared with the insinuation that Pharaoh had lain with her before the plagues effected her release.

That Hagar's lack of respect for Sarah is connected to the events in Egypt, is shown by Sarah's recrimination of Abraham (Gen. 16:5). Why else is she blaming him? He did just as she asked. But Sarah says that the wrong being done to her is his fault, "My wrong be upon thee." He put her in a shameful position, and now she bears the brunt of that shame. Sarah wants to punish Hagar harshly. She says to Abraham, "the Lord judge between me and thee," as if to say, "Let God decide which wrong is the greater, that which I am about to do to her, or that which you have already done to me."

Abraham recognizes the truth of Sarah's argument, and tells her to do that which is good in her eyes. Often in the Bible, when one is told to do that which is good in one's eyes, the speaker deplores what he knows will be done (Jud. 19:24, I Sam. 1:23, 3:18, 14:36, 14:40). The prospect of Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar pains Abraham, but he knows that he has done Sarah an injury, and that she is still hurt by it.

Abraham again falls into moral debt to Sarah by the events in Gerar, the second wife/sister tale, and she again collects her due by banishing Hagar and her son, Ishmael. The Gerar experience is much worse for Sarah than was the Egyptian episode. That Abraham plays the same

trick again, despite her remonstrance with him, must be wounding; that he does not bother to ask her compliance, but now takes her for granted, is belittling. This time there is more anxiety. She has already had the experience of being taken to Pharaoh's harem; she knows too well what is likely to happen. And in Gerar she does not get away with silent assent; she must voice her participation in the deceit (Gen. 20:5). Her anguish is greater the second time, and Abraham pays a higher price for it.

Sarah is sensitive to derision. We learn that from her response to Hagar's contempt, and from her words when she bears a son in her old age: "everyone that heareth will laugh on account of me" (21:6). The preposition that is translated "on account of" often means "at" or "against" when used with verbs of mocking or laughter. The verb used here means laughter, but has been translated variously because of its other connotations. The same verb is used three verses later when Sarah sees Ishmael "making sport." She was apprehensive about being the target of laughter, and now her fear is realized.

Ishmael was at least thirteen years old at the time of the incident in Gerar (17:25), old enough to know what was going on. His mother, punished severely enough to keep silent publicly, nevertheless may have privately told her son her version of the events in Egypt. Abimelech, more conscious than Abraham of Sarah's humiliation, pointed out to her that, besides the cattle and servants, he was paying a thousand pieces of silver specifically as a "covering of the eyes" to all who were with her (20:16). But his money did not blind a disgruntled teenager, nor did it bribe him to hold his tongue. Left out, jealous, and envious of the great feast that is being given in honor of Isaac, Ishmael retaliates for the slights that he perceives, and jeers insultingly about Sarah's past. Perhaps he directs his remarks to Isaac and says something like, "Yeah, well, you may be having a swell party, but your mother's a whore!"

Whatever his words, they are more than Sarah can bear. She has had trouble with the mother and now has the same trouble with the son. She tells Abraham that the pair must go, but she does not tell him the true reason why this must be so. Abraham loves Ishmael, and might make excuses for him, saying he is only a boy and is acting out typical sibling rivalry. She needs a subterfuge to get rid of these thorns, and so she says that she does not want Ishmael to share in Isaac's inheritance. Of course, it had not taken her years, from Isaac's birth to his weaning, to notice that Ishmael was also an heir.

In the third wife/sister story, Isaac, too, becomes indebted to his wife, Rebecca, for, to her hazard, she must accede to his guileful stratagem. Rebecca collects the debt when she effects the deception of switching her favorite son, Jacob, for Isaac's pet, Esau (Gen. 27). A trick for a trick, a sister for a wife, a second born for a first born. Like Sarah, she proffers a plausible excuse when she tells Isaac why



she wants Jacob to leave town (27:46). She could have told him the truth; he knew that he had given Esau's blessing to Jacob, and that Esau was unhappy. She could have said, "Let Jacob leave town for a few days until Esau cools off." Maybe she feared that Isaac would say, "A good thrashing is just what Jacob needs." Or maybe we learn here that their husbands had taught both Sarah and Rebecca to lie.

### *The Theological Level*

The marked congruity of the first wife/sister story and the Israelite enslavement, alerts the reader to expect similar agreement between the other wife/sister tales and later events in the Bible. The second wife/sister account has been compared to the capture of the holy ark by the Philistines in I Samuel 4-6. Umberto Cassuto, in *Commentary on Genesis* (Vol. 2, p. 341), observes the striking parallels between the first wife/sister story and the narrative of the Hebrew bondage in Egypt. He mentions the agreement between the second wife/sister story and I Samuel 4-6, but, since he finds it less clear, does not ascribe any particular significance to it. I, however, find it significant in several respects. It reiterates the theme of animosity between the Philistines and the Hebrews, it repeats the *leitmotif* of comedy, and it introduces the metaphor of the holy ark as the bride of Israel.

In this passage of I Samuel, the Philistines capture the ark from the Israelites in battle, and keep it until God afflicts them with, apparently, hemorrhoids. They then return the ark to the Israelites along with propitiatory gifts: images of hemorrhoids cast in gold and golden mice. To some interpreters, this combination suggests that the Philistines had bubonic plague, and were sending symbols of their buboes and of the rodent carriers of the disease. I think the conjecture projects backward a greater scientific sophistication than their civilization possessed. Mice were sacred cultic animals to the pagans (Isa. 66:17). Juxtaposing images of their affliction with images of mice may have been considered curative, just as Russian Orthodox Christians today place representations of body parts in front of icons. Perhaps the redactor names mice as objects of the Philistines' veneration and specifies hemorrhoids as their disease to heighten the humor of the account and increase its resonance with the comedic second wife/sister tale. Certainly, as conciliatory gifts to the monotheistic Hebrews, these infidel symbols seem so risibly inappropriate that one might doubt the possibility of such a gesture, did not one remember President Reagan's gift of a signed Bible to fundamentalist Islamic Iranian leaders (*The New York Times* 1/30/86).

The concordance between I Samuel 4-6 and the story of Abraham in Gerar, is manifest. In each story, the cherished object is taken by the Philistines — another reason for "anachronistically" placing the Phi-

listines in Abraham's time. In each story, God afflicts the Philistines with barrenness/hemorrhoids, and in each the wife/ark is returned with gifts. Just as Sarah is dear to Abraham, so is the word of God that is contained in the ark dear to Israel. The equivalency established here between Abraham's love for his wife and Israel's love for the word of God is critical to a third analogy that I find — that between the third wife/sister tale and II Samuel 6:16-23.

In this passage of II Samuel, King David joyfully accompanies the ark into Jerusalem. His wife, Michal, King Saul's daughter, looks out of a window and sees David "leaping and dancing before the Lord" (that is, before the word of God contained in the ark), and she "despised him in her heart" (II Sam. 6:16). She speaks sharply to David about his behavior, ostensibly angry at the improper, undignified exposure caused by his prancing about ("... who [David] uncovered himself ...") (6:20). David replies heatedly that he will make merry before the Lord (6:21), using that word ("make merry" is one word in Hebrew) to describe his frolicking.

The Hebrew word used for "make merry" has the same root as the verb "laugh." It is the root for Isaac's name, and we have already noted its use in the stories in which he figures. In this instance, I believe, it is specifically reminiscent of the use of the word in the third wife/sister tale, in which Abimelech looks out of a window and sees Isaac "sporting" with Rebecca (Gen. 26:8). "Sporting" and "making merry" have the same root in Hebrew. In Genesis, a king looks out of a window and sees "sporting" to his displeasure; in II Samuel, a king's daughter looks out of a window and sees "making merry" to hers.

The analogy between the second wife/sister story and the theft of the ark by the Philistines leads the reader to consider that the word of God contained in the ark may be described metaphorically as the wife of Israel. The analogy between the third wife/sister tale and the David story, and their use of the same root word, further guides the reader to equate "sporting" with a wife and "making merry" before the Lord: David "sports" with the word of God. The connotation of conjugal sexuality that is so crucial to the Genesis story is important to the II Samuel story as well. It enables us to understand that Michal is jealous of David's love for the word of God. She is not indignant because he showed a bit too much thigh. Just as Sarah finds a plausible reason to banish Hagar and Ishmael, and Rebecca uses a pretext to separate Jacob and Esau, so does Michal use a specious justification for her anger with David. The function of the wife/sister stories here is to clarify the scene between Michal and David, expose their hearts, and explain God's disposition to both.

Romantic love is not stressed in the Bible as it is in modern Western literature, and yet we are explicitly told of the love that eight different men have for individual women or a set of women. We are told that

Isaac loved Rebecca (Gen. 24:67), Jacob loved Rachel (29:18,20,30), Shechem loved Dinah (34:3), Elkanah loved Hannah (I Sam. 1:5), Rehoboam loved Maacah (II Chron. 11:21), Ahasuerus loved Esther (Est. 2:17), Samson loved Delilah (Jud. 16:4), and Solomon loved his foreign wives (I Kings 11:1-2). But only once in Scripture are we told of a woman loving a particular man. We are told that Michal loved David, and we are told it twice (I Sam. 18:20,28). Her love for David is obviously remarkable, in both senses of the word. And as it is doubly impressed upon us, we can also assume it is an extreme, possessive passion.

David has many wives and concubines. We are not told that Michal resents any of them. Perhaps she knows that they do not count in David's heart, that his greatest love, his only true love, is for his bride, all Israel's bride, the word of God. Michal looks out of a window and, obsessively, sees David embracing her only rival. We learn that she herself is not God-fearing, as she uses *teraphim* (small idols) to make a dummy in David's bed, which fools her father's henchmen and saves David's life (I Sam. 19:13).

God, not Abimelech, causes Isaac to prosper at the end of the third wife/sister story (Gen. 26:12). Because of David's love for God, he, too, is rewarded with military victory again and again, and his failings are forgiven. Because of Michal's jealousy of this love, she "had no child unto the day of her death" (I Sam. 6:23). One might think that she remained childless because David, offended by her outburst, would not live with her as husband and wife. If this were the case, Scripture would have said something like, "And David went in to her no longer." We would not be told simply that she was childless, because childlessness, the Bible has shown us repeatedly, is caused not by man but by God. It is not clear whether Michael remained barren or died in childbirth, but either fate may be regarded as God's judgment.

### *Conclusion*

The three wife/sister stories may all be historical fact. They may be a skillful inter-weaving of pre-existent stories, or they may be elaborated from a single, more primitive, folk-tale. Perhaps they are an ingenious creation of the redactor. However they come to us, each has its own function in the Biblical narrative, and is inventively used to justify the ill-feeling between the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Philistines; to explain why these enemies of the Hebrews are never consigned by God to oblivion as are other peoples; to warrant the seemingly cruel and devious actions of Sarah and Rebecca; and to make the theological point that the love of God is a surpassing virtue. The three stories are not repeated by mistake.

# *Footprints, Traces, Remnants: The Operations of Memory in Dan Pagis' "Aqebot"*

WENDY ZIERLER

## **Footprints [Aqebot]**

"From Heaven to the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night" — Yannai

Against my will  
I was continued by this cloud: restless, gray, (1)  
trying to forget in the horizon, which always receded

Hail falling hard, (2)  
like the chatter of teeth:  
refugee pellets pushing eagerly  
into their own destruction

In another sector (3)  
clouds not yet identified.  
Searchlights that set up  
giant crosses of light  
for the victim  
Unloading of cattle-cars.

Afterwards the letters fly up, (4)  
after the flying letters, mud  
hurries, snuffs, covers for a time

It's true, I was a mistake, I was forgotten (5)  
in the sealed car, my body tied up  
in the sack of life

Here's the pocket where I found bread, (6)  
sweet crumbs, all from the same world

Maybe there's a window here — if you don't mind, (7)  
look near that body, maybe you can open up

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WENDY ZIERLER is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Princeton University. She has recently been in Israel on a Fulbright grant, working on a dissertation on women writers and the immigrant experience.

a bit. That reminds me  
(pardon me) of the joke about the two Jews  
in the train, they were travelling to

Say something more; talk. (8)  
Cain I pass from my body onwards —

\*

From the heaven to the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night  
long convoys of smoke (9)

The new seraphim who haven't yet understood, (10)  
prisoners of hope, astray in the empty freedom,  
suspicious as always: how to exploit  
this sudden vacuum, maybe the double citizenship will help,  
the old passport  
maybe the cloud? what's new in the cloud,  
here too of course  
they take bribes. And between us: the biggest bills  
are still nicely hidden away, sewn  
between the soles —  
but the shoes have been piled up below:  
a great gaping heap

Convoys of smoke. Sometimes (11)  
someone breaks way,  
recognizes me for some reason, calls my name.  
And I put on a pleasant face, try to remember:  
who else  
who

Without any right to remember, I remember (12)  
a man screaming in a corner, bayonets rising  
to fulfill their role  
in him

Without any right to remember. What else (13)  
was there? Already I'm not afraid  
that I might say

without any connection at all: (14)  
there was a heart, blue from excessive winter, and a lamp, round  
blue, kind-hearted.  
But the kerosene disappears with the blood, the flame flickers —  
—

Yes, before I forget:  
the rain stole across some border, so did I,  
on forbidden escape-routes, with forbidden hope,  
we both passed the mouth of the pits

Maybe now (16)  
I'm looking in that rain  
for the scarlet thread

Where to begin? (17)  
I don't even know how to ask.  
Too many tongues are mixed in my mouth. But  
at the crossing of these winds  
very diligent, I immerse myself  
in the laws of heavenly grammar: I am learning  
the declensions and ascensions of  
silence.

Who has given you the right to jest? (18)  
What is above you already know.  
You meant to ask what is within you,  
what is abysmally through you.  
How is it that you did not see?

But I didn't know I was alive. (19)  
From the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night  
angels rushed, sometimes one of them  
would look back, see me, shrug his shoulders  
continue from my body onwards

\*

Frozen burst, clotted, (20)  
scarred,  
charred, choked.

If it has been ordained that I pull out of here, (21)  
I'll try to descend rung by rung,  
I hold on to each one carefully —  
but there is no end to the ladder, and already  
no time. All I can do is fall  
into the world

And on my way back (22)  
my eyes hint to me:



you have been, what more did you want to see?  
Close us and see:  
you are the darkness, you are the sign.

And my throat says to me: (23)  
if you are still alive, give me an opening, I  
must praise.

And my upside-down head is faithful to me, (24)  
and my hands hold me tight:  
I am falling falling  
from heaven to the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night.

\*

Well then, a world. (25)  
The gray is reconciled by the blue.  
In the gate of this cloud, already a turquoise  
innocence, perhaps the light green, Already sleep.  
Heavens renew themselves, try out their wings, see me

and run for their lives, I no longer wonder. (26)  
The gates burst open:  
a lake  
void of reflections

Over there, in that arched blue on the edge of the air, (27)  
I once lived. My window was fragile.  
Maybe what remained me  
were little gliders that hadn't grown up:  
they still repeat themselves in still-clouds, glide,  
slice the moment  
(not to remember now, not to remember)

And before I arrive (28)  
(now to stretch out to the end, to stretch out)  
already awake, spread to the tips of my wings,  
against my will I feel that, very near,  
inside, imprisoned by hopes, there flickers  
this ball of earth,  
scarred, covered with footprints.

\* \* \* \* \*

Innovation in art is not the same as innovation in the human psyche; just the opposite. Innovation in art has as its motivation the extension of humanity, not a flow of spite against it. The difference between barbarian and civilized expectations is the difference between the will to dominate and the will toward regeneration. To dominate you must throw the rascals out; to regenerate, you have to take them with you. Spite vandalizes. Innovation redeems.

Cynthia Ozick<sup>1</sup>

So great was the need for the continuity in the face of the Nazi onslaught that rebuke was read as lament and subversion became part of the greater tradition. Jews drew upon their strength to fight the apocalypse from a new amalgam of anger, repudiation, and creative betrayal.

David Roskies<sup>2</sup>

Dan Pagis' *Gilgul*<sup>3</sup> includes some of the strongest and most arresting poetry written in response to the *Shoah*: a cycle of Holocaust poems called "*Qaron hatum*" (the Sealed Car), a number of other poems which do not deal exclusively with the Holocaust but, nevertheless, touch upon some of the themes explored in "*Qaron hatum*," and a long, difficult poem called "*Aqebot*" (Footsteps). Of all of these poems, the long piece, "*Aqebot*," is the most striking and complex. As Naomi Sokoloff writes, "*Aqebot*" constitutes a kind of compendium of outstanding themes touched upon in the pieces of "*Qaron hatum*" which expand out into other parts of *Gilgul*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, "*Aqebot*" can serve well as a framework or beginning point for the study of the other Holocaust or Holocaust-related poems in *Gilgul*, particularly those poems which deal with various notions of survival and personal and collective memory.

"*Aqebot*" tells the story of a survivor's journey to, and out of, the death camps, through a celestial or spiritual realm where, neither dead nor alive, he follows the literal and metaphorical smoke-trail of memory. Ultimately, after his journey of remembrance, he finds his way back to the world and to his present. The poem is divided into three sections and twenty-eight stanzas.<sup>5</sup> The first section describes various scenes relating to the speaker's death camp experiences and his eventual escape; the second depicts his transformation into a quasi-spirit and his encounter with

1. From "Innovation and Redemption," *Metaphor and Redemption* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1989), p. 243.

2. From David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 208. This book and Alan Mintz's book, *Hurban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), two fascinating studies of the history of Jewish literary responses to catastrophe, provided me with a theoretical framework upon which to build my own understanding of Pagis' Holocaust poetry.

3. Dan Pagis, *Gilgul* (Ramat Gan: Masada Publishers, 1970).

4. Naomi Sokoloff, "Transformations: Holocaust Poems in Dan Pagis' *Gilgul*," *Hebrew Annual Review* (Vol. 8, 1984): 236.

5. All English citations from the poem will be from Dan Pagis, *Points of Departure*, Stephen Mitchell trans. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), and will be identified in the body of the paper by stanza number.

death, guilt, and memory as such; the third, describes his return to the material world and his attempt to begin his life anew.

Like many of the shorter poems in *Gilgul*, “*Aqebot*” is steeped in paradox and contradiction, gripped by tensions between the survivor-speaker’s need both to be silent and to bear witness, to escape from and to enter or re-enter history, to forget and to remember. Throughout “*Aqebot*,” but primarily in the first half, Pagis’ speaker expresses the desire and need to shrug off memory — to forget his personal experiences in the death camps and to reject traditional Jewish explanations and apologies for catastrophe. And yet, all the while, he remembers. Paradoxically, it is through his various attempts to forget and to reject that Pagis’ speaker takes the first steps toward transforming, re-invigorating, and preserving memory — the memory of specific Holocaust events, as well as religious dicta, legends, poems (both by others and by Pagis, himself), prayers and hopes. By incorporating traditional Jewish explanations or responses to catastrophe in subversive, iconoclastic contexts, and by expressing rage, disbelief, and doubt through the medium of traditional Jewish expressions of faith and continuity, Pagis’ speaker achieves poetic catharsis, enabling him to invent a kind of memory that he can live with, continue and be continued by.

# I

“*Aqebot*.” The dialectical operation of memory in this poem is encapsulated in the meanings and origins of this Hebrew word. All of these meanings — footprints, traces, remnants — bespeak both survival and death. Because they have a material reality that originated in the past and continues into the present, a reality that can be reconstituted or redirected in the present and future, “*Aqebot*” represent the enduring nature of previous experience and the remarkable staying power of the past. At the same time, because they are constant reminders of what was and no longer is, “*Aqebot*” points to the irretrievability of the past, the impotence and, hence, the burden of memory.

The Biblical origins or usages of this word demonstrate a similar tension. The root, “*aqeb*,” appears in the Bible for the first time in the story of the birth of Esau and Jacob:

When her [Rebecca’s] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they name his Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel (*aqeb*) of Esau; so they named him Jacob. (Genesis 25: 24–26)<sup>6</sup>

The same root reappears when Jacob dresses up like his brother, Esau, and brings his father a meal of game, in order to claim for himself Esau’s birthright and blessing. When Esau discovers what his younger brother has done, he cries out: “Was he, then, named Jacob that he might

6. *The Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1982).

supplant/deceive (*aqab*) me these two times?" The Biblical usages of the root *aqeb* or *aqab* thus bring to mind the birth of Jacob and the covenant between God and the children of Jacob or Israel. At the same time, they recall the enmity between Jacob and Esau, between Jew and non-Jew, the competition between them for the birthright of the firstborn, the deception practiced upon Esau by Jacob, and the many subsequent persecutions inflicted upon the descendants of Jacob.

The competing usages or definitions of the root *aqeb*, or *aqab*, thus mirror or embody the competing qualities of memory. The world is both beautified and scarred by history; it is both enriched and hopelessly damaged by its past. Memory and survival are a great burden, one that the survivor-speaker of this poem feels has been thrust upon him by an irksome quirk of fate. "Against my will/I was continued by this cloud" he says. He was passed over by the clouds of smoke from the crematoria; he was continued by time, attached unwillingly to the continuum of history, pursued by his experiences.

Because memory has been thrust upon him against his will, he remembers with defiance and vengeance. In the first section of the poem as well as in the first seven stanzas of the second section, Pagis' speaker challenges Jewish theology and literary memory by pitting them against his immediate personal memories of the *Shoah*. Pagis' sacrilegious rejection of Jewish collective memory begins in the third stanza of the poem. Here, he underscores the history of Christian persecution of world Jewry. At the same time he subtly criticizes the traditional Jewish concept of sacred martyrdom, of dying *al kiddush Hashem*, with the following images:

In another sector  
clouds not yet identified.  
Searchlights that set up  
giant crosses at night  
for the victim [*korban*]  
Unloading of cattle cars.

In no uncertain terms, Pagis identifies the crimes of the Nazis with the long history of Christian persecutions of the Jews. It is the Jews, unfortunately, who have inherited the mantle of suffering from the Jewish Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Contrary, however, to the assertions of both Christianity and Judaism (the notion of dying *al kiddush ha-Shem*), suffering and martyrdom do not redeem. The extermination of the Jews in the concentration camps, above all other Jewish experiences of persecution and death, attested to this bitter fact. Theirs was a factory martyrdom, instant and meaningless. Disembarking from the cattle cars, the search lights shining, the Jews were designated immediately for the crematoria, transformed almost instantly into smoke, vapour, and cloud.

7. For more information about Jewish use of crucifixion imagery in cultural responses to collective persecution, see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, Chapter 10, pp. 258–310.

In this mode of response to collective Jewish suffering, Pagis follows in the modern Jewish tradition of “sacrilegious parody,” a literary technique which, according to David Roskies, was popularized in the nineteenth century by the Yiddish and Hebrew fiction writer Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Mokher Seforim). As Roskies writes, in his wonderfully illuminating study of Jewish cultural responses to catastrophe, *Against the Apocalypse*,

thanks to Abramovitsh, parody came into its own as a preferred mode of response. Henceforth, the more closely linked a concept was to the central articles of Jewish faith — to retribution and redemption — the more likely it was to be subverted, inverted, mimicked, and mocked in the face of catastrophe.<sup>8</sup>

Pagis takes his rejection of sacred martyrdom several steps further in the fourth stanza, with its references to the “flying letters,” with a bitter parody of the famous Jewish legend of the martyrdom of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion. The Babylonian Talmud tells that Rabbi Haninah was captured and condemned to death by the Romans for continuing to learn and teach Torah:

Straightaway they took hold of him, wrapped him in the Scroll of the Law, placed bundles of branches around him and set them on fire. Then they brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart so that he should not expire quickly . . . His students said to him. “Rabbi, what do you see?” He responded: “Burning parchments and flying letters.” (B. *Avodah Zarah* 18a)<sup>9</sup>

The reply of Rabbi Haninah to his students has been invoked repeatedly throughout Jewish history as an affirmation of the eternity of the Torah and the inviolability of the Jewish spirit. The Torah scroll was destroyed, but the covenant between God and Israel survived. Rabbi Haninah’s body burned, but his soul was sanctified through his steadfast commitment to the Torah and through his martyrdom. In “*Aqebot*,” Pagis admits no solace from Jewish collective memory, flatly rejecting Rabbi Haninah’s assurance of the eternity of the Torah and the continuity of commitment. “Afterwards” — after the burning of the Jews in the crematoria — “the letters fly up,/after the flying letters and mud/hurries, snuffs, covers for a time.” (stanza 4) In this depiction of execution, the letters of the Torah, the Talmud and all other Jewish literary explanations of catastrophe fly up and migrate from the scene. No longer can they serve as adequate or relevant means of accounting for atrocity. In the absence of these ancient spiritual “letters” or constructs of meaning, all that remains is the relentless materiality and filth of the earth to snuff the fire, to cover the corpses and ash, for a time.

8. Ibid., p. 77.

9. The translation of this passage from tractate *Avodah Zarah* of the Talmud was taken from the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (London: The Soncino Press, 1983).

Pagis' sacrilegious parodies continue in the next stanza (stanza 5), where his speaker recalls his escape from the death camp, subversively alluding to a famous line from the memorial liturgy: "In exchange for my pledge of charity on behalf of the deceased, let his soul be bound in the bonds of eternal life" ("zarur bi'zror ha-hayyim"). Inherent in this prayer is the notion that man and God co-operate in matters of life and after-life, that through prayer and good deeds one can appeal to God and alter the status of a soul. Pagis' speaker turns this entire notion on its head, by using this line to describe neither death nor afterlife, but, rather, a very haphazard, chance getaway:

It's true, I was a mistake, I was forgotten  
in the sealed car, my body tied up  
in the sack of life. (stanza 5)

According to Pagis, then, life and death are completely arbitrary designations. The speaker of the poem escapes his death quite by accident; he is simply "forgotten in the sealed car," taken for a dead man, when, all along, he was "tied up in the sack of life." There is no God presiding over the process. Heaven and after-life are not acknowledged possibilities. All that exists is life, death, and the limbo state of the survivor, a kind of death-in-life, as signified by Pagis' use of a death prayer to describe his survivor's escape into life.

This stanza serves as an interesting counterpoint to another Holocaust poem in *Gilgul*, "*Qatuv bi'ipparon ba-qaron he-hatum*" ("Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car"), the most widely anthologized of all of Pagis' poems. Here, the speaker never escapes the sealed railway car. All that remains is her message, a poem without end about a cycle of horrors that has no end:

*Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car*

here in this transport  
i am eve  
with abel my son  
if you see my other son  
cain son of man [ben adam]  
tell him that i<sup>10</sup>

Two elements mark this poem specifically as a Holocaust piece: the title, "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car," and the word "*mish-loah*" ("transport"). This is a Holocaust poem, however, with a mythical/universal message. Eve, the Biblical mother of humankind, and her son Abel, the first man in the Bible to be murdered, are the deported victims; Cain, son of Adam or Man, the first murderer in the Bible, is the implied perpetrator. Eve's message, cut off before its completion, functions both as a response to the specific historical situation of the Holocaust and a general response to the murderous history of the world. On a specific level,

10. From Dan Pagis, *Points of Departure*, p. 23.



her scrawlings exemplify the desperate efforts of so many Jewish Holocaust victims to bear witness. The lack of closure to her message metonymically and mimetically symbolizes the abruptness of their deaths and their resultant inability to complete their testimony. Eve's fall into silence also bespeaks the unspeakable nature of the Holocaust, a horror that can never be fully depicted in any *wordly* or *worldly* manner.

On a more general level, her message operates like a broken record of universal memory. As Sidra Ezrahi writes, "[t]he lack of closure recapitulates the experience of lives abruptly terminated, the meager lines of speech surrounded with vast white margins of deathly silence."<sup>11</sup> Against this background of silence, the archetypal story of the invention of murder by Cain, the first son of man, pounds out an endless refrain of murder and horror:

if you see my other son  
cain son of man  
tell him that i  
[am] here in this carload  
i am eve  
with abel my son  
if you see my other son  
cain son of man  
tell him that i  
[am] here in this carload . . .

Tragically, Eve's cause, as represented by her message/poem, is forgotten in the Sealed Railway Car. The speaker of "Agebot" also finds himself forgotten in the sealed railway car, but for him this is a stroke of fortune. Or is it? Unlike Eve, this speaker escapes, and is able to record a long, completed message, a poem with an end. In the process, however, he must bear a heavy load. He must confront and overcome his haunting visions and memories of atrocity and the guilt burden of his accidental survival.

All of the themes mentioned in the discussion above — the recurrent cycle and burden of memory, the chance nature of escape and survival, and the limbo state of the survivor — are touched upon in yet another poem in the "*Qaron hatum*" cycle, entitled "*Hamisdar*" ("The Roll Call").<sup>12</sup> In this selection, the Nazi officer who is leading roll call, "a diligent angel [of death] who worked hard for his promotions," suddenly discovers a discrepancy in his numbers of prisoners. The speaker of the poem has escaped; he is the mistake. "Only I," says the fugitive speaker,

am not there, am not there, am a mistake  
turn off my eyes, quickly, erase my shadow.  
I shall not want [*lo ehsar*]. The sun will be right  
without me: here forever.

11. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Dan Pagis — Out of Line: A Poetics of Decomposition," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 335–363.

12. Dan Pagis, *Points of Departure*, p. 25.

As in "*Aqebot*," escape and survival in "*Hamisdar*" are the result of a quirk of fate: the camp guard discovers a mistake in his calculations, and then arbitrarily chooses to ignore it. Contrary to the assertions of the Psalmist in Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want [*lo ehsar*]"), which is cleverly parodied in this poem ("I shall not want. The sum will be right/without me"), no God-Shepherd watches over and protects the flock assembled in the camp; it is the Nazi officer (with his occasional mistaken calculations) who determines the fate of the Jews. Events occur randomly, haphazardly.

The fugitive-speakers of both of these poems, "*Aqebot*" and "*Hamisdar*," face several overwhelming obstacles on their road to freedom. In order to complete the escape, the speaker of "*Hamisdar*" must become something other than a man, visionless and invisible: "Turn off my eyes, erase my shadow," he says. The elimination of eyes and shadow, two very basic aspects of wholeness and human physicality, represent in clear terms the indefinite status of the survivor. As Alan Mintz writes, in Pagis' poetry, "to survive your death does not mean to live. The status of the survivor is liminal and ambiguous. He is already dead yet existent. his fate is this-worldly mortality."<sup>13</sup> Constantly subjected to recurrent visions of unjustifiable atrocity, the survivor (as represented by the speakers of both of these poems) is chained to horrors of his past, to the deadweight of memory.

For the speaker of "*Aqebot*," nothing seems capable of sweetening or lightening the load of memory: neither the "sweet crumbs" (stanza 6) of bread which he remembers discovering in his pocket, nor the language of humour, as exemplified (in stanza 7) by "the joke about the two Jews/in the train, they were traveling to."<sup>14</sup> The sweet crumbs fail to soothe for they are too much a part of the "same world" of evil (stanza 6). The attempt at joke-telling<sup>15</sup> fails because human language has become imprinted with atrocity. This joke, as recalled by Freud, demonstrates "the democratic mode of thinking of Jews, which recognizes no distinction between lords and serfs, but also, alas, upsets discipline and co-operation."<sup>16</sup> It laughs at the differences between traditional and modern Jews, and,

13. Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 263.

14. The joke mentioned here about the two Jews travelling on a train may be an allusion to a joke included in Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which reads as follows: "A Galician Jew was travelling in a train. He had made himself really comfortable, had unbuttoned his coat and put his feet up on the seat. Just then a gentleman in modern dress entered the compartment. The Jew promptly pulled himself together and took up a proper pose. The stranger fingered through the pages of a notebook, made some calculations, reflected for a moment, and then suddenly asked the Jew: 'Excuse me, when is Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)?' 'Oho!' said the Jew, and put his feet on the seat again before answering."

15. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, *The Standard Edition*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1960), p. 95.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

more importantly, at the uneasy relations between Jew and Gentile. Placed within the context of this Holocaust poem, however, this casual joke metamorphoses into cruel irony. When speaking about the death camps, one cannot joke or theorize about Jewish frustration of discipline or co-operation, or about Jewish-Gentile relations. In the Holocaust context, “gentlemen” strangers on the train become the mortal enemies of Jewish passengers; Jews sharing a train compartment, though they are different both in appearance and lifestyle, ride a common train to their deaths. Pagis shows that the Holocaust has imprinted language with images of horror; one can no longer use the words “Jew,” “train,” and “travelling” without conjuring up images of sealed railway cars and crematoria.

“Say something more; talk,” Pagis’ speaker says in the last stanza (8) of the first section. This survivor needs to establish new lines of communication. “Can I pass from my body onwards —” he asks. Can I somehow be transformed into spirit and thus dodge the responsibilities of this-worldly existence?

## II

In the second section of the poem, Pagis’ survivor-speaker tests this possibility, leaves his body, and rises into the heavens. He discovers, unfortunately, that the heavens have become, literally and figuratively, permeated by the smoke and memory of the crematoria. In a parody of a medieval *piyyut* by Yannai (the first line of which serves as the epigraph to “*Aqebot*”), the now-spirit speaker describes the appearance of the heavens after the Holocaust, confronts the heavenly God Who stood by as the horrors were being perpetrated, and laments the immense reach of human evil and suffering. “From heaven to the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night/long convoys of smoke,” writes Pagis (stanza 9). In contrast, Yannai’s conventionally structured poem, which includes such conventional rhetorical figures as anaphora and incremental repetition, is a paean to God, a celebration of His celestial reaches, His infinite domain:

From the Heavens to the Heaven of Heavens,  
 From the Heaven of Heavens to the Dark Clouds,  
 From the Dark Clouds to the Abode  
 From the Abode to the Dwelling Place  
 From the Dwelling Place to the Skies  
 From the Skies to the Plains  
 From the Plains to the Plains  
 From the Plains to the Height of the Throne  
 and from the Height of the Throne to the Chariot —  
 who can be compared to You, who is your equal? . . .<sup>17</sup>

Pagis’ seemingly unstructured and formless poem subverts both the

17. The translation of Yannai’s poem is taken from T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 218–219. Carmi’s translation does not include line breaks; the line breaks that appear in this paper conform to the line breaks in the actual Hebrew text.

traditional form and content of Yannai's *piyyut*. The skies and clouds which, in Yannai's poem, represent the infinite majesty and pristine beauty of God's reign, represent, in Pagis' poem, a dark absence of divine power over, and intervention in, the affairs of the human world. The inhabitants of heaven in "*Aqebot*" are not traditional angels or seraphim, the ministers and messengers of God; they are the "new seraphim," a name which, in this Holocaust context, becomes a pun on the Hebrew verb word *seruphim* (burnt ones) from the verb *saraf* (to burn), identifying the angels as the newly burnt victims of the *Shoah*.

It is in this spirit state, however, floating beside these trails of smoke, that the speaker of the poem undergoes a series of confrontations with his past, which, ultimately, empower him to rediscover a quasi-hopeful present as well as a form and forum for self-expression. On several occasions, he meets a familiar seraph, a figure from his past, who has been exterminated by the Nazis. These meetings compel him, despite his feelings of anger, guilt, incapacity, and despair, to remember the horrors and commemorate the losses:

And I put on a pleasant face, try to remember  
who else  
who

Without any right to remember, I remember  
a man screaming in a corner, bayonets rising  
to fulfill their role  
in him

Without any right to remember. What else  
was there? (stanzas 12–13)

The most striking feature of these three stanzas of recollection are the speaker's contradictory opinions about the act of remembering. "Without any right to remember, I remember," he says. On the other hand, he has a recurrent need to remember. Furthermore, he considers remembrance a forbidden indulgence. Perhaps this idea of the forbidden quality of memory stems from the notion that recollections always fall short of the actual event, that history always betrays reality. Or, perhaps, what prevents him from remembering freely is his guilt for surviving while so many others perished. Whatever the case, he remains torn between contradictory impulses and imperatives.

"Pagis' image of the survivor," writes Alan Mintz, as "torn between contradictory instructions to forget and to remember, is one of the strongest moments in Hebrew literature."<sup>18</sup> Mintz makes this comment in the context of his interpretation of another "*Qaron hatum*" poem, "*Hora'ot li-gneivat ha-g'vul*" ("Instructions for Crossing the Border"), a poem which

18. Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 265.

both illuminates and is illuminated by the examination of "*Aqebot*." The poem reads as follows:

Imaginary man, go. Here is your passport.  
 You are not allowed to remember.  
 You have to match the description:  
 your eyes are already blue.  
 Don't escape with the sparks  
 inside the smokestack:  
 you are a man, you sit in the train.  
 Sit comfortably.  
 You've got a decent coat now,  
 a repaired body, a new name  
 ready in your throat.  
 Go. You are not allowed to forget.<sup>19</sup>

Like the speaker of "*Aqebot*," the imaginary man of this poem has escaped, survived, and, in the process, has undergone major personal transformations. His passport reads with a new name, a new physical description. In order to escape successfully, he must forget his past identity. "You are not allowed to remember," he is told. He must act the part of the typical train passenger, unaffected by memories of previous train rides. Then, just as he is about to embark upon his new life, the imaginary man receives the opposite command: "You are not allowed to forget."

The contradictory instructions or impulses expressed both in "*Aqebot*" and in "Instructions for Crossing the Border" clearly derive from a set of similarly contradictory Biblical instructions, also written after a catastrophe — the Amalekite attack upon the Israelite camp after the Exodus from Egypt. "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey," says the Bible,

how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear . . . You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the Heaven. Do not forget. (Deuteronomy 25:17)<sup>20</sup>

Remember. Blot out the memory. Do not forget. These contradictory impulses have been canonized in Jewish collective and personal memory. On the one hand, one is compelled to blot out the memory of past evils and escape into a neutral present. On the other hand, one is compelled to remember, to pay respect to those who died, and bear witness to past atrocities in order to ensure that they never occur again.

In "*Aqebot*," Pagis repeatedly pits these contradictory impulses against one another, in order to effect a kind of dialectical resolution. Eventually, after repeatedly remembering against his will, angrily, reluctantly and remorsefully, Pagis' speaker arrives at a turning point in his response to his own personal catastrophe. Memory begins to console (stanza 15). Sacrilegious parodies of Jewish literary and liturgical texts be-

19. Pagis, *Points of Departure*, p. 27.

20. *The Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1982).

gin to gesture toward a foreshortened form of “sacred parody.” That is, Pagis’ speaker begins to describe his own experiences in terms of Jewish collective memory, to adapt various sacred Jewish texts in ways that demonstrate identification with, and fondness for Jewish tradition, without going so far as accepting “the covenantal framework of guilt and punishment.”<sup>21</sup>

This turning point begins in stanza 15, where, once again, the speaker himself, as if addressing a friend in conversation, willingly recalls his escape from the camps: “Yes before I forget:/the train stole across some border, so did I.” The speaker then (stanza 16) begins to muse over this experience, making a very poignant allusion to the Bible:

Maybe now  
I’m looking in that rain  
for the scarlet thread

The allusion here is to Joshua 2, to the story of Rahab the harlot who sheltered the Israelite spies who were sent to Jericho before Joshua’s invasion of the city. Upon their departure, the Israelite spies promise Rahab that, because of her kindness, neither she nor her family will be harmed by the invading Israelites. They demand, however, that she tie a length of scarlet thread to the window through which she received the spies. This scarlet thread physically distinguishes her house from those of her neighbours; it also functions as a metaphor of faithfulness, a tangible symbol of the act of charity through which she earned her right to survive. As Pagis’ speaker (an extension of Pagis himself, who escaped from the camps) looks back upon his past, he cannot help contrasting his story with that of Rahab. What entitled him to survive? Where was the scarlet thread that granted him immunity from harm?

The difference between this adaptation of Jewish literary memory and those seen in the earlier parts of “*Aqebot*” is subtle but suggestive. Unlike the parody of the story of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon or of Yannai’s *piyyut*, where traditional responses to catastrophe are completely flouted, this stanza represents an effort on the part of the speaker to incorporate his own experiences into the continuum of Jewish collective memory, to explain his good fortune in traditional terms, to adapt rather than reject. This is no easy task. The Holocaust, as shown earlier in the

21. In *Against the Apocalypse*, p. 20, David Roskies makes an important distinction between these two modes of literary response: sacred and sacrilegious parody. He explains that, before the modern era, when a survivor inverted or parodied scripture, it was his means of keeping the faith. Roskies writes:

At the moment of crisis, individuals have the ability to reinterpret and radicalize their tradition. They can take the supreme act of profanity and convert it into sacred use, creating their own personal “sacred parody” — to borrow out of context from the English devotional poet George Herbert ... What makes individual sufferers people of faith is their willingness to accept the covenantal framework of guilt, punishment and restitution; or, to put it differently, it is in the self-imposed limitations of their parody.



poem, does not readily lend itself to traditional explanations or characterizations. Implied in this reference to the Biblical story of Rahab is the idea that, in reality, there are no scarlet threads, there are no ready assurances of survival or community. At the same time, the allusion to Rahab also demonstrates a yearning for a world in which scarlet threads really do exist, and a nostalgia for the mythical world of the past.

The speaker's newborn desire to view personal experience through the lens of Jewish memory is even more apparent in the next stanza. After floating around in limbo, he has "reached the crossing of these winds." He needs to move onward with his life, but finds himself at a loss for a starting point:

Where to begin?  
I don't even know how to ask.  
Too many tongues are mixed in my mouth. But  
at the crossing of these winds,  
very diligent, I immerse myself  
in the laws of heavenly grammar: I am  
learning the declensions and ascensions of silence. (stanza 17)

Embedded in this stanza are two allusions to Jewish literary texts. The first is a somewhat humorous allusion to the Passover Haggadah, to the fourth son at the Passover Seder, who does not even know how to ask his father about the Exodus story. Pagis' speaker, like the ancient Israelites, has experienced torture, enslavement and exodus. He has been initiated to pain and suffering. What he knows nothing about, however, is redemption. In this respect, he is like the fourth son, completely out of sorts, entirely incapable of identifying with the meaning of the Passover story. To complicate matters, he has run into a language barrier. Like the people in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (the second Jewish literary allusion in this stanza), who suddenly find themselves speaking different languages, this refugee (like Pagis himself, who migrated to Israel after the war) has left his native tongue behind, and is at a loss for a way to articulate the right questions. "Too many tongues are mixed up [*nivolelu*] in my mouth," he laments. And, so, like God who stood by silently as the horrors of the Holocaust took place, this shade of a survivor, hovering between his past and his present, resolves to immerse himself "in the laws of heavenly grammar," in "the declensions and ascensions of silence."

Immediately, however (stanza 18), an inner voice chastises him for mocking or mimicking God, for attempting to understand the grammar of heaven, for abandoning his human nature. "Who has given you the right to jest?/What is above you already know." This is the moment of catharsis in the poem, where the speaker confronts the fact that heaven is above him and beyond his grasp; he must now come to terms with his role as a human being. "You meant to ask," his inner voice intones, "what is within you,/what is abysmally through you. How is it that you did not see?"

## III

It is at this point in the poem that the speaker's re-transformation from spirit back to body begins (stanza 20). "Frozen and burst, clotted/scarred,/charred and twisted," he rediscovers his physicality. As he falls back into the world, he regains his physical senses, and comes to terms with the responsibilities and privileges of survival:

And on my way back  
my eyes hint to me:  
you have been, what more did you want to see?  
Close us and see:  
you are the darkness, you are the sign [*ha'ot*]

And my throat says to me:  
if you are alive, give me an opening, I  
must praise (stanzas 22–3)

As he falls away from the long convoys of smoke, "from heaven to the heaven of heavens to the heaven of night" (stanza 24), he comes to identify with his role as witness to catastrophe, as poet, like the medieval Hebrew poet Yannai, whom he re-echoes here. He is a living sign of the darkness of the past, of the horror that was and must never be again. The line, "you are the darkness, you are the sign [*ha'ot*]," serves as a counterpoint to the earlier allusion in the poem to the legend of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion. In that earlier section (stanza 4), the speaker said, "Afterwards the letters [*otiot*] fly up,/after the flying letters [*otiot*] mud." Here the speaker, who became earlier a kind of flying letter, that is, a physical entity transformed into ether, coasting through the sky on the smokeheels of memory, acknowledges that, as a survivor, he is not merely a burnt, vaporous letter (one meaning of the Hebrew word *ot*), but a palpable sign and a witness to the past. He is a man of voice and words, one who can speak, describe, bear testimony, blame, praise, and offer thanksgiving.

The second part of the third section of the poem, stanzas 25–28, describes the speaker's final descent into the world, the panorama that he sees as he approaches earth:

Well then: a world.  
The gray is reconciled by the blue.  
In the gate of this cloud, already a turquoise  
innocence, perhaps light green. Already sleep.  
Heavens renew themselves, try out their wings . . . .

Significantly, this final section of the poem makes no direct reference to the speaker's painful experiences in the death camps. Moreover, it contains no allusions to previous Jewish literary texts. After a long process of remembering, railing, and digging deep, Pagis' speaker finally becomes capable of forgetting, of looking at the sky without remembering the long convoys of smoke. For one brief moment, purged and renewed, he gazes upon a lake (stanza 26) that is "void [pure] of reflections" of his

past. Deliberately he staves off his dark memories — “(not to remember now, not to remember)” (stanza 27) — in favour of happy childhood recollections, of windows, kites and blue clouds.

Nevertheless, despite this moment of respite, Pagis’ speaker recognizes that he can never permanently erase or ignore personal and collective memory. The earth to which he is returning may flicker with hope. But the body and soul of this earth, like his own, have been eternally “scarred” and “covered” with “*aqebot*,” with the footprints, remnants, or traces of the past. He, the poet, “is the darkness. [He] is the sign.” (stanza 22) And it is his responsibility to tell the tale.

## *Not A Boast But Necessity*

ALAN JACOBS

Down  
Where the blood  
Meets the shore,  
Where many died  
And many more  
Watched —

Come,  
I will show you —

Where the wind  
Has its way,  
Where I  
Must have mine  
And make you  
A nation  
At the healing  
Line.

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ALAN JACOBS is a physician and poet.

# *Akiba: Sage in Search of The Messiah; A Closer Look*

SAMSON H. LEVEY

AS FAR BACK AS 1972 I SUGGESTED THAT *PRDS* in the Tannaitic sources (in which four sages entered *PRDS* and only one came out "in peace") should be read *PARADOS* rather than *PARDES*, making it the Hebraized form of the Greek *PARADOSIS*, hence a probing (by the sages) of early Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional vocalization of the word is *Pardes*, from the Greek *paradeisos*, meaning "garden," hence, the garden of speculative theosophy, or esoteric philosophy.<sup>2</sup> My hypothesis is that there is a reference to Christianity in this Baraita. Assuming that Ben Zoma's dereliction was his adoption of Christianity, which the Rabbis sought to conceal, something startling emerges from this passage. We can retain the consonants of the word *PRDS*, but we must reconsider its vocalization, which had never before been questioned by any Talmudic authorities. I propose that, instead of *Pardes* it be read *Parados*, the Hebrew rendering in apocopated form of the Greek word *Paradosis*, which was the term used extensively by Christians, in the second century and thereafter, to apply to the authoritative tradition or transmission of an authentic doctrine concerning the life of Jesus and the early teachings of the Church, with special reference to the materials which subsequently were incorporated into the writings of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> What the Baraita tells us is that the four made a probing study of Christian origins and beliefs.

There are four versions of *PRDS*: *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:3,4; B. (Babylonian Talmud or *Bavli*) *Hagigah* 14b; J. (Jerusalem Talmud or *Yerushalmi*) *Hagigah* 77d; and the *Midrash Rabbah*, *Song of Songs* 1:4;1. Of these, the versions of the *Yerushalmi* and *Midrash Rabbah* are inaccurate, confusing Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma. The version of the *Bavli* has Amoraic interpolations, corrupting the original text. From the standpoint of authenticity and literary style, the version of the *Tosefta* appears to be the simplest and the most accurate, the original source. It reads:

Four entered *PRDS*, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher and R. Akiba. Ben Azzai caught a glimpse and died. Concerning him Scripture says, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones (*hasidim*)" (Ps. 116:15).<sup>4</sup> Ben Zoma caught a glimpse and was smitten. Concerning

1. S.H. Levey, "The Best Kept Secret of the Rabbinic Tradition," *JUDAISM*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1972: 468.

2. M. Jastrow, *Dictionary* etc., vol. II, p. 1216 (a).

3. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961), p. 1014 f., *sub Paradosis*.

4. For *hasidim* as "the faithful," see *Ketubim* (Philadelphia: JPS, new series), p. 156.

him Scripture says, "If you have found honey eat only as much as you need" (Prov. 25:16). Aher caught a glimpse and mutilated the plants. Concerning him Scripture says, "Do not let your mouth cause your body to sin" (Eccl. 5:5). R. Akiba entered in peace and emerged in peace. Concerning him Scripture says, "Take me along! We would run after you!" (Song of Songs 1:4).

In order to understand this Tannaitic passage it must be borne in mind that the proof-texts cited have a significant and direct bearing on the personalities to whom they are applied in this particular context. They are a fitting Scriptural depiction of what happened to these men as a consequence of their investigation of the *paradosis*. What prompted their probe of Christianity was a fervent search for liberation from Rome and the shackles which it imposed upon Judaea and its tyrannical treatment of the Jewish people. Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and burning of the Temple in 70 C.E. were especially painful and bitter. Versed in Scripture, these sages were looking for the Messianic deliverance divinely promised in the Bible. Christianity then, as now, claimed that the Messianic hope was fulfilled in Jesus. These four sages wanted to see for themselves if there was any validity to the Christian claim, hence their probe of the *paradosis*. How were they affected by this experience?

Ben Azzai, according to the text, "glimpsed and died." The proof-text tells us that he died a *hasid*, a faithful Jew who rejected the Christian claim. However, it is not quite that simple, and requires some elaboration. According to a Rabbinic opinion, one who has been a *min*, a Christian or other deviant from the Jewish faith, and returns to the fold, is regarded as though he had died and has been restored as a Jew.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Ben Azzai toyed with Christianity but was a *ba'al t'shuvah*, a penitent who died a loyal Jew.

Ben Zoma "glimpsed and was smitten," infected by the *paradosis*, and became a renegade from Judaism, a Judaeo-Christian. The proof-text is remarkably revealing. "If you have found honey, eat your fill . . ." The Rabbinic twist of the verse makes it an affirmative statement rather than a question. What does honey have to do with Ben Zoma's defection? Everything! Christian writers of that era mention that an integral element in the ritual of the Christian baptism of converts, consisted of feeding them milk and honey either during or immediately after the baptismal rite.<sup>6</sup> The reference to honey in the proof-text points to Ben Zoma as a *min*, a Jewish Christian, and explains the meaning of his being "smitten."

As for Aher, Elisha b. Abuyah, "he mutilated the plants," that is,

SAMSON H. LEVEY is Professor Emeritus of Rabbinics and Jewish Religious Thought at Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA.

5. B. Avodah Zarah 17a.

6. E.N. Fallaize, "Honey," *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. VI, p. 770, #6.

he sought to induce Jewish youths to stray from the Torah by arguing with them, as the Talmud explains.<sup>7</sup> The proof-text is appropriate: do not let your tongue (power of persuasion) lead your flesh (kin) into sin, as you are sinful with your pagan ideas.

R. Akiba entered in peace and emerged in peace, true to the Jewish faith and its teachings, unflinching in his love of God, his dedication to Torah, and his opposition to the Christian contention of Messianic fulfillment. Here, too, the proof-text is most appropriate. R. Akiba exalts the Songs of Songs as a serenade between God and Israel, declaring it to be the most sacred book of the Hagiographa.<sup>8</sup> The verse from the Song of Songs is cited as Israel's response to Christianity's attempt to subvert the Jewish people from their traditional religion. Israel favors the direction of R. Akiba towards God's promise of true Messianic redemption. "Take me along! We will run after you!" We will follow R. Akiba; we will remain faithful to the God of Israel!

The *Tosefta* version of *PRDS* is a remarkable literary document, amazing in its simple construction, powerful in its portrayal of personalities, and brilliant in its deployment of Scripture to convey descriptive depiction of delicate theological themes. It is an outstanding example of Tannaitic literary genius at its best.

The redactors of the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*), several hundred years after the Tannaitic era, took liberties with the *PRDS* original, and made it look like a *Merkabah* (chariots) document related to the *Hekhalot*, (palaces), which focus on human ascensions through the celestial palaces to the vision of God's chariot or throne. (This mystical-magical literature was a product of the Babylonian Amoraim, the sages that followed the Tannaim, between the 3rd and 6th Centuries, C.E.). The ploy is an ingenious deception, which critical analysis reveals. After the opening statement, the *Bavli* inserts a caveat by Akiba to his colleagues: "When you come to the slabs of pure marble do not say, 'Water, water,' for it is written, 'He who speaks falsehood shall not endure before My eyes'" (Ps. 101:7).

Gershom Scholem<sup>9</sup> brilliantly expands on the *Merkabah* theme from the *Hekhalot* literature with reference to this *Baraita*. He sees it as a test of the mystic's ascent through the sixth heaven, assuming that the caveat is an integral part of the Tannaitic statement. The caveat, however, is not found in any of the other versions of *PRDS*, and hence must be suspect. Meyer Waxman<sup>10</sup> suggested that the caveat is related to the confrontation between Ben Zoma and R. Joshua b. Hananiah, during which Ben Zoma mentions upper waters and lower waters,<sup>11</sup>

7. B. *Hagigah* 15a,b.

8. M. *Yadayim* 3:5.

9. G.G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (N.Y., 1954), pp. 52 ff.

10. M. Waxman, *Shimon Ben Zoma* (Heb.) (St. Louis, 1928). pp. 13 ff.

11. B. *Hag.* 15a.

which is also a brilliant observation. In any case, I contend that the caveat is an intrusion into, and a distortion of, the original version in the *Tosefta*.

The *Bavli* also deviates from the *Tosefta* by omitting the proof-texts for Aher and Akiba where they should be, delaying them to a later discussion,<sup>12</sup> thus fragmenting the *Baraita* into confusion and disarray. While it correctly quotes the *Tosefta* at the outset, “*Rabbi Akiba yaza beshalom*,” “R. Akiba emerged in peace,” it goes on to distort the original by asserting, “*Rabbi Akiba alah beshalom veyarad beshalom*,” “R. Akiba ascended (sic!) in peace and descended (sic!) in peace,” altering the text so as to make it conform to the *Merkabah* interpretation.

But hard as it tried, and much as it shrouded *PRDS* with legend, the *Bavli* could not completely conceal the truth. It fabricated the *Merkabah* legend of Aher’s encounter with Metatron in heaven, in which he questions the authenticity of the Jewish traditions concerning the nature of heaven. Upon voicing his suspicions, Aher was denounced, was driven out of the heavenly world, and became an apostate. After that, the *Bavli* maintains that “when he would get up to leave the *Bet Midrash* (house of study), many *sifre minim* (Christian books) would fall from his lap.”<sup>13</sup> Then there is a startling revelation: “*The ministering angels also sought to thrust R. Akiba out (as they had done to Aher), but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, ‘Leave this elder alone, for he is worthy to avail himself of My glory.’*” (italics mine)

To be sure, Akiba rejected Christianity and its Messianic claims, but the Rabbis knew that Akiba was not entirely unaffected by his *PRDS* experience, and that he was initially influenced by some Christian ideas. The Rabbinic tradition has left us some subtle clues to that effect.

Searching for the true Messiah who would liberate his people from the yoke of Rome, Akiba offered an interpretation of a passage in the book of Daniel in an eschatological context, which irked his colleagues. The verse is Dan. 7:9: “As I looked on, thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat.” The verse creates a theological problem in that the plural form, *khorsavan*, implies two Divine thrones.

As it was taught, one throne is for Him (God) and one throne is for David (the Messiah), these are the words of R. Akiba. R. Jose the Galilean said to him, Akiba, how long will you persist in profaning the *Shekhinah* (God)? Rather, one throne represents God’s attribute of justice, and one throne represents God’s attribute of righteousness . . . R. Eleazar b. Azariah said to him, Akiba, what business do you have with Aggadah (theology)? Desist from your discussion and go, confine yourself to the laws concerning defilement of leprosy and tents (in which you are an expert). Rather, one represents God’s throne, and one represents His pedestal, a throne on which to sit and a pedestal as His footstool, as it is said, The heavens are My throne, and the earth is My footstool (Is. 66:1).<sup>14</sup>

12. B. *Hag.* 15,a,b.

13. Ibid., 15b. See the Soncino translation, *Hagigah*, p. 100.



The accusations of R. Jose and R. Eleazar b. Azariah against Akiba were serious, as indicated by the severity of the language. The offense must have been serious and vexing. It was a theological deviation from the acceptable norms of Jewish religious ideas. Akiba's profanation of God in this context is a reference to his interpretation that the Messiah sits next to God, an idea that seems to be a reflection of Mark 14:62, "... you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power (*Hagevurah*) and coming with the clouds of heaven." Akiba was clinging to some ideas that were tainted by Christian interpretation. He not only incurred the displeasure of his associates; he had to answer to the authorities of the Jewish community, rather severely.

The Tannaitic sources are not explicit, but critical analysis leads me to a plausible reconstruction of what happened and why it happened. The revelation comes from the testimony of R. Johanan b. Nuri, who ranked high in the inner circle of the patriarch Gamaliel II: "I call upon heaven and earth to testify for me that on more than four or five occasions I had Akiba publicly flogged, because I had brought accusation against him before Rabban Gamaliel."<sup>15</sup> What the charges against R. Akiba were is not specified.

Louis Finkelstein, whose biography of Akiba is a masterpiece of erudition and literary style, has an interesting comment on this passage:

That such humiliating punishment should have been meted out to one of the foremost members of the academy ... would seem incredible, and indeed some copyists, out of respect for both Gamaliel and Akiba, have tried to soften the text. But the accuracy of Johanan's reports cannot really be doubted. We could only wish that he had described the derelictions for which Akiba was punished. They cannot have been infringements of the ceremonial law, for which the punishment would have been nothing less than expulsion from the academy. We must assume that some violation of academic rules was involved, and that even this served only as a pretext; actually, Gamaliel could not forgive Akiba for his frank and forcible championship of the plebeian cause.<sup>16</sup>

Finkelstein reduces this biographical interlude to his favorite theme, which recurs many times throughout the volume: patrician versus plebeian, but his conclusion is questionable. A mere violation of academic rules would not have called for so drastic a measure as official scourging. And the patriarch Gamaliel, whatever his shortcomings, would not have resorted to, or even permitted, the flogging of a sage of the stature of Akiba, simply because Akiba differed with him in matters of political opinion. There is more here than meets the eye. We must apply the criteria of literary criticism to arrive at a reasonable and plausible explanation of what happened.

I contend that it goes back to the *PRDS* and its devastating effect

14. B. *Hag* 14a.

15. *Sifra*, *Kedoshim* 4:9.

16. L. Finkelstein, *Akiba* (Phila: Atheneum, 1936), p. 113 f.

on the four who delved into it, including Akiba. The clue is to be found in R. Jose's response to Akiba's interpretation of the thrones passage in Daniel: "Akiba, how long will you persist in profaning the *Shekhinah* (God)?" R. Jose minces no words. He accuses Akiba of committing *Hillul ha-Shem*, profanation of God's name,<sup>17</sup> an unforgivable sin which God punishes forthwith,<sup>18</sup> hence *karet* (extirpation), and those who incur *karet* are flogged.<sup>19</sup> It seems most probable that Akiba's dereliction was theological, and could have involved interpretations that had a Christian flavor. This could also have prompted R. Eleazar b. Azariah's castigation of Akiba to desist from theological speculation and to limit himself to *Halakhah*, in which he excelled.

There is a further bit of evidence which we must not overlook. In 2 Cor. 11:24, Paul asserts: "Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one," an exact description of the *Bet Din's* imposition of *malkot*, official flogging.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Paul, there can be no question as to why he was scourged — his persistent preaching of Christian doctrine. Akiba's case also seems to have overtones of a theological dereliction. The coincidence of the two passages, 2 Corinthians and *Sifra*, even to the exact number of times that each was flogged, is, indeed, alarming.

Nor can we be certain that Akiba's status in the academy remained secure. There is a strong hint that he may have suffered exile, either official or self-imposed. It is the Zephyrion interlude, during which Akiba resided in Zephyrion on Cyprus.<sup>21</sup> Finkelstein maintains that Akiba left Yabneh because he was weary of defending the plebeian cause against the aristocratic posture of the patriarch Gamaliel.<sup>22</sup> I am of the opinion that he may have been embarrassing to Gamaliel. His unyielding search for the Messiah could have been regarded as bordering on treason against the Patriarchate, since the Messianic fulfillment would have meant the abolition of patriarchal rule. A bristling passage, attributed to Rabban Gamaliel, and suggesting prophetic insight, reveals the patriarch's thinking on the subject:<sup>23</sup>

When the Messiah does come,<sup>24</sup> *chutzpah* will become widespread and inflation will become oppressive. Even though the vine will produce grapes in abundance, the price of wine will be prohibitive. The government will be subverted to *minut*, and there will be none to reprove it. The council-

17. B. Yoma 86a: "If one's colleagues are ashamed of him, this is *Hillul ha-Shem*."

18. *Sifre*, Deut. #238. See G.F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. II, p. 108 f.

19. M. *Makkot* 3:15.

20. Ibid. 3:10.

21. Jastrow, *Op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 408. See also the Soncino, *Baba Kamma*, p. 664. Finkelstein, contrary to all other authorities, places it in Galilee, probably confusing it with the Biblical town (Num. 34:9), which had long since disappeared (*Akiba*, p. 118).

22. Finkelstein, *Akiba*, p. 118.

23. *Derekh Erez Zuta* X:1. In M. *Sotah* 9:15, it is an anonymous Mishnah. My translation.

24. *B'ikbot Meshiha*, lit., "In the footsteps of the Messiah."

chamber shall become a brothel. Galilee will be destroyed and Gablan will be desolate. The people who live on the border will wander around from city to city, but no one will take pity on them. The wisdom of the Scribes will become odious; God-fearing people will be despised; and truth itself will disappear. The young will embarrass their elders, and the elders will rise submissively in the presence of youngsters. (Quoting Micah 7:6) "The son will treat his father with contempt; the daughter will rise up against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies will be those of his own household." The face of that generation will be like the face of a dog, and the son will show no deference to his father. Upon whom can we lean? Upon our Father Who is in heaven!<sup>25</sup>

The scene here portrayed is contrary to the Biblical Messianic vision.<sup>26</sup> The Mishnah paints a disturbing picture of what the Jewish people can expect if their Messianic dream should be realized. The structure of society will collapse; religious, moral, and ethical values will vanish; high intellectual and cultural standards will disappear; and the traditional family ideals and attitudes will go by the board. The inner life of the Jewish people will be turned upside down, and there will be no redemption. The Messiah is no redeemer, no liberator, no savior. The only One whom the people can trust and lean on for help is our Father Who is in heaven!

Akiba's sojourn in Zephyrion, precipitated by circumstances, afforded him the opportunity to express with impunity his passionate, anti-Roman, religiously inspired Jewish nationalism and Messianic hope. The Jews living on Cyprus at the time (c.100-115 C.E.) were in the throes of a rebellion against Rome. Headed by Artemion, the Jewish forces succeeded in capturing virtually the entire island. It was an ideal situation for Akiba, who found there a congeniality of spirit. For him, any triumph over Rome was tantamount to a Messianic deliverance. In the end, however, Rome crushed the rebellion, and expelled the Jewish populace.<sup>27</sup>

We know that Akiba left Zephyrion and returned to Yabneh. There are a number of Rabbinic sources which refer to this sojourn in Zephyrion, citing Akiba's opinion on various themes before and after his return from there.<sup>28</sup> There is every indication that the Zephyrion interlude was a major turning point in his life, and he changed his mind

25. This passage could be an eyewitness description of conditions in the Jewish community as a result of the defeat of Bar Kokhba, who was designated the King Messiah by Akiba. That the anti-Messianic sentiment persisted in the Patriarchate, is evident from the statement of R. Hillel, brother of the patriarch Judah II: *En mashiach l'Israel, shek'var akhluhu biyeme Hizkiah*, "There will be no Messiah for Israel, since they have already devoured him in the days of Hezekiah." B. *Sanh.* 99a.

26. E.g., Is. ch. 11.

27. R. Gottheil, "Cyprus," Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. III, p. 400. D.J. Silver, *History of Judaism*, vol. I (N.Y., 1974), p. 257.

28. B. *Bava Kama* 113a; *Tosefta B.K.* 10:17; J. *B.K.*, 9:15, 7a; J. *Avadah Zarah* 2:4, 41b; *Sifre*, Num. 4; *Sifre Zuta* 5:10. See also Finkelstein, *Akiba*, p. 329, n. 53.

about things as a result of his experience on Cyprus. Probably the most significant aspect of this change in his thinking, was sweeping out all vestiges of the *PRDS*. This becomes abundantly clear in the Talmud's expansion of its discussion of the thrones in Daniel. "Did he (Akiba) accept the interpretation from him (R. Jose) or did he not accept it? Come and listen attentively: one throne represents God's attribute of justice and one throne represents God's attribute of righteousness, *these are the words of R. Akiba . . .*"<sup>29</sup> What a reversal of opinion on the part of the great Sage! It was truly a tremendous turn, a veritable return to the unadulterated faith of Jewish tradition, and the purely Jewish exposition of Scripture free of sectarian tampering and of the exploitation of heretics of every shade. It marked the beginning of Akiba's intensive polemics against heresy in general and especially the Christian heresy, which he fought both ideologically and by ritual innovation.

Akiba proceeded to inculcate in his students a profound love of Torah, with special emphasis on the veracity of the Scriptures. One consequence was his influence in two major translations of Scripture — *Targum Onkelos*, the Aramaic version of the Pentateuch, and a Greek version, that of Aquila.<sup>30</sup> The latter was designed to counteract the *Septuagint*, which the Church had appropriated and corrupted. It was characterized as "the Synagogue's weapon of defense against the nascent Church."<sup>31</sup>

The Church also corrupted the Passover observance. Under the guise of celebrating the festival, the Gospels point to a Christian transmutation of the Passover into the Eucharist,<sup>32</sup> thus abolishing the memorial of Israel's liberation from the bondage of Egypt. Akiba and his associates responded by instituting the Seder ritual and the Haggadah, thus salvaging the Passover from the oblivion to which the Christians sought to consign it.<sup>33</sup>

In the matter of atonement and purification, which Christianity claimed were effected only by baptism in the blood of Christ, Akiba very subtly but firmly discounts its efficacy.

R. Akiba said, "Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom do you cleanse yourselves and who is it that purifies you? Your Father who is in heaven. As it is said, 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you will be clean (Ezek. 36:25).' And it is said, 'O Lord, *mikveh* (hope) of Israel'; (Jer. 17:13) just as the *mikveh* (immersion pool) cleanses the unclean, the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel."<sup>34</sup>

29. B. *Hag.* 14a.

30. J. *Kiddushin* 59a. In spite of the confusion of identities, these were two distinct translations under the influence of R. Akiba. See L. Ginzberg, "Akiba," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 305, 6; Finkelstein, *Akiba*, p. 165.

31. M.L. Margolis, *The Story of Bible Translations* (Phil: JPS, 1917), p. 39.

32. Mark, ch. 14.

33. See S.H. Levy, "Ben Zoma, the Sages, and Passover," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring, 1981: 33 ff.

34. M. *Yoma* 8:9.

Coming as it does at the end of the tractate *Yoma* in the Mishnah, this statement implies the negation by Akiba of a cardinal Christian ritual, and his firm faith that atonement and purity can be achieved only by direct communication with God Himself, the only true Redeemer.

Akiba's ultimate attitude towards Jewish heretics and Judaeo-Christians is summed up in the famous chapter<sup>35</sup> in Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, *Helek*:

All Israel have a share in the world to come, as it is said, "Your people, all of them are righteous, they shall inherit the land forever, the branch which I have planted, the work of My hands in whom I glory" (Is. 60:21). And these are the ones who have no share in the world to come: he who says there is no proof of the resurrection of the dead in the Torah; and he who says that the Torah was not divinely ordained; and the *epikoros*. R. Akiba says, "Also, one who reads the *hizonim*<sup>36</sup> books; and one who whispers an incantation over a wound and says, 'All the disease which I inflicted upon Egypt, I will not inflict upon you, for *I am the Lord Who heals you*'" (Ex. 15:26). (italics mine)

In addition to those who are mentioned in the anonymous Mishnah, Akiba denies the reward of the world to come to those who are heretics reading heretical books which are outside the official canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the faith healer who uses the verse from Ex. 15 as his formula. The key phrase in this formula are the last three words, *Ani YHWH Rofekha* (I am the Lord who heals you). Using *gematria*, the letters in the phrase have the numerical value of 388, plus 3 (representing the number of words in the phrase), equals 391, exactly the sum of the letters in *Yehoshua*, the full name for Jesus. Louis Ginzberg is of the opinion that early Christian healers used this verse so as to heal secretly in the name of Jesus without overtly using his name.<sup>37</sup> Akiba was well aware of what was going on, and made his pronouncement accordingly.

So much for the bits of direct evidence that Akiba had eliminated the *PRDS* from his thinking. His Messianic activism may have been temporarily quiescent, but deep in his heart his Messianic hope must have continued to throb, and his hatred of Rome must have simmered within him. Could it have been that he brought his lifelong search for the Messiah to a painful end? That search had been fortified by Johanan b. Zakkai on his death-bed: "Prepare a throne for Hezekiah, king of Judah, who is coming,"<sup>38</sup> esoteric language implying an imminent Messianic advent. Akiba would never forget!

35. Ch. 10 according to the Yerushalmi and Maimonides. See Soncino, *Sanhedrin*, p. 601, n. 1.

36. Lit., usually understood as the excluded or apocryphal books. My view is that *hizonim* could be Essenes, in Hebraized form, with Hebrew *m. pl.* ending in place of the Greek *oi*.

37. L. Ginzberg, "The Attitude of the Synagogue etc.," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 41 (1922): 123,4. See also M. Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1950), p. 80f.

38. B. *Berakhot* 28b.

It is not surprising that, when Simeon ben Koziba appeared on the scene and led his forces against the Roman legions, Akiba designated him as the Messiah.

R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: My teacher, Akiba, used to expound the verse (Num. 24:17), "A star has marched forth out of Jacob," Koziba has marched forth out of Jacob. When R. Akiba would see Bar Koziba he would say, "This is he, the King Messiah."<sup>39</sup>

On the strength of Akiba's interpretation, Ben Koziba was given the cognomen Bar Kokhba.<sup>40</sup> Akiba was the spiritual inspiration who encouraged Bar Kokhba in his military exploits against the Romans. The war lasted for three years, 132-135; Jewish armies were victorious; Jerusalem was taken and under Jewish control; Bar Kokhba issued his own coinage — portraying a star superimposed upon the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup> Akiba's faith in the military Messiah appeared to be vindicated; but, alas, it turned out to be a replay of the Jewish experience on Cyprus under the military leadership of Artemion. Hadrian crushed the rebellion of Bar Kokhba, as Trajan had crushed the insurrection of Artemion!

Perhaps R. Johanan b. Torta was right when Akiba was proclaiming Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, and he taunted him, "Akiba, grass will grow from your jawbones and still the son of David (the Messiah) will not be coming."<sup>42</sup> Events may have convinced Akiba that the dream of a political-military Messiah was in vain, since all the Messiah-figures who had arisen, heroic and charismatic though they might have been, proved to be fantasies and delusions. The star over Jerusalem was no more viable a solution for the Jewish people than the star over Bethlehem! The time had come for a new vision and a re-directed Messianic emphasis.

It was a dramatic twist of history that made Akiba aware of what he should have known all along and it was none other than the wicked Hadrian who brought him to the full realization of what it was that made the Jewish people invincible and assured their survival. In order to destroy the Jewish people, Hadrian had issued an edict against Torah, declaring both the teaching and the study of Torah a capital offense, punishable by the vilest methods of execution.<sup>43</sup> Akiba bristled with defiance! He had devoted his life to Torah, and had built mounds upon mounds of *halakhot* upon every jot and tittle of the Torah.<sup>44</sup> Torah

39. J. *Ta'anit* 68d.

40. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. I, p. 89.

41. M. Margolis, and A. Marx, *History of the Jewish People* (Phil., 1927), p. 214. W.D. Davies & L. Finkelstein, *Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. I., (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 50, 51, #8.

42. J. *Ta'anit* 68d.

43. Margolis and Marx, p. 216.

44. B. *Menahot* 29b.

was life, and the indestructible assurance that Israel would live to the end of time! And it was Torah that was the very heart and soul of the Messianic hope.<sup>45</sup> The Jew must not only live by the Torah, but for it, and be prepared, if need be, to die for it. And so he did, executed by the Romans with the *Shema* on his lips.<sup>46</sup>

Akiba began his search for the Messiah with the *PRDS*. His Messianic odyssey led him through some bitter battles within the Bet Midrash, as well as the two major anti-Roman conflicts of Artemion and Bar Kokhba with their Messianic overtones. What he finally arrived at was the supermundane Messianism of Torah, which had been the vital immortal spirit of Israel since our people first appeared on the pages of history. Akiba himself summed up the result of his theological quest in a cryptic statement largely misunderstood by rabbinic scholars:

Rabbi Akiba . . . used to say, *Adam* (italics mine) was divinely favored, in that he was created in the image (of God). By an act of exceptional divine favor, it was made known to him that he was created in the image (of God). As it is said, "For in the image of God He made the man" (Gen. 9:6). Israelites are divinely favored, in that they are called sons of the Omnipresent God. As it is said, "You are sons of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1). Israelites are divinely favored, in that a precious object has been given to them. By an act of exceptional divine favor, it was made known to them that to them was given a precious object with which the world was created. As it is said, "I have given you good instruction, My Torah, do not forsake it" (Prov. 4:2).<sup>47</sup>

Read in the context of Akiba's life and theological struggles, this statement is a powerful polemic against Pauline doctrine. Akiba's glorification of Adam is a refutation of Paul's denigration of the man whom God had created in His own image.<sup>48</sup> His assertion that all Israel are sons of the living god is a rebuttal of Paul's contention, adopted by the evangelists and incorporated as a dogma of the Church, that Jesus was the only son of God.<sup>49</sup> Akiba's declaration of the pre-mundane primacy of Torah as the divine instrumentality of creation was designed to counteract the Pauline claim that Jesus was the primordial agent of God in creating the world.<sup>50</sup> With rhythmic cadence and soft-spoken words, supported by proof-texts from Scripture, Akiba delivers a hammer blow to Paul's boisterous claim that God has rejected the Jewish people in favor of his newly-proclaimed Israel — those who are faithful to his concept of the Messiah.<sup>51</sup>

As the era of Hadrian passed into history, there surfaced in the

45. S.H. Levey, *The Messiah, an Aramaic Interpretation*, p. 143. "The Messiah would make the Torah the universal law for all mankind."

46. Margolis and Marx, p. 216.

47. M. Abot, 3:18.

48. I Corinthians 15:22 ff.

49. Romans 1:3 *passim*. See A.E. Burn, "Creeds," *HERE*, vol. IV, p. 237.

50. Colossians 1:16 ff.

51. Romans 9:6 *passim*.



Tannaitic tradition the portrait of another Messiah, who dies in battle against Rome.<sup>52</sup> He is the Messiah son of Joseph, who is said to be the one who paves the way for the Messiah son of David. There are theories upon theories concerning the identity of this person, including identification with Bar Kokhba. I venture a radical, mystical interpretation, which no scholar has ever articulated, and which the Tradition would never dare to admit. It is the Torah Messiah, who is killed leading the Torah's battle against Rome. Here is my equation:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{AKIBA BEN YOSEF} \\ = \\ \text{MASHIAH BEN YOSEF} \end{array}$$

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52. J. Klausner, *Harayon Hameshihi Biyisrael*, pp. 289 ff. Klausner traces the transmutation of Israel's Messiah idea from the political to the purely spiritual ideal.

# *Is There Afterlife After Auschwitz?* *Reflections On Life After Death* *In the 20th Century*

SIMCHA PAULL RAPHAEL

## *Do Jews Believe in the Afterlife?*

There is a story told about an eighty-five year old Jewish woman who was in a convalescent hospital, dying. Her concerned daughter wanted to do all she could to help the elderly woman in her final days and weeks. She planned going to the hospital to read to her mother selections from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* — a religious text with elaborate descriptions of what one encounters subsequent to physical death.

Just stop for a moment and contemplate that scene. An elderly Jewish woman, probably raised on gefilte fish and chicken soup, is close to the end of her life. Her baby-boomer daughter, a product of Dr. Spock and the Beatles, willingly ready to read to her mother the contents of a sixteenth century Tibetan deathbed manual. That scene suggests a certain kind of cultural smorgasbord possible only in the age of the global village.

A psychologist at the hospital, who was working with dying patients, cautioned the young woman against reading to her mother the contents of this death manual created by Tibetan Buddhist monks. He explained that the arcane symbolism and deathbed meditations of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* would frighten and confuse the elderly woman, rather than help her understand the process and experience of dying. Instead, the daughter was advised to go and read to her dying mother old Yiddish love songs.<sup>1</sup>

Given the circumstances, I suppose that Yiddish love songs were an appropriate substitute. The scene of an elderly, dying Jewish woman being read Yiddish love poetry corresponds more closely to my own cultural sensibilities. And yet, at the same time, an important question emerges from this anecdote: why are Yiddish love songs the recommended resource for assisting a Jewish person at the time of death? The Tibetan Buddhists have the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; there is an Egyptian *Book of the Dead*; and even medieval Christianity produced a genre of literature entitled, *Ars Moriendi*, “the Art of Dying,” specifically designed for the time of passage from this world. What, exactly, are the Jewish resources

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1. This story is found in: Stephen Levine, *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 272.

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SIMCHA PAULL RAPHAEL is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Religion at La Salle University, in Philadelphia, Pa.

for guiding a person through the transition from life to death? And, furthermore, is there a Jewish tradition on the afterlife journey of the soul, or specific Jewish texts which can be of help to people at the time of death?

I have been asking this very question for almost two decades now, both from a place of personal inquiry which has subsequently motivated my own study of Jewish tradition, and also as a question which evokes fruitful discussion in the Jewish death awareness classes and workshops that I lead.

Allow me to phrase the question in a way which speaks most directly to people's personal experience. Imagine for a second that someone approaches you — perhaps a non-Jewish colleague, or someone just beginning to learn about Judaism, or even your own child — and asks quite directly: "What do Jews believe about life after death?" How do *you* respond to such a question?

Generally, such inquiry yields an interesting variety of replies. One frequent response is: "We have a belief in the afterlife, but we have no details to speak of." Or: "Jews believe that the soul is eternal, and after death one lives on as a soul." Another recurring theme is: "Jews believe that there is a resurrection of the dead that will take place after the Messiah comes. My grandmother told me to burn my finger nails so I won't have to go looking for them at the time of resurrection." Or, with some variation, many often claim: "Jews believe in a World to Come, *Olam Haba*, and eventually one enters this world." In a similar vein, others say: "When I was young and my father died, I was told he was with God in Heaven. We believe in Heaven."

After surveying the beliefs of a room full of people, which I get to do quite often, I find that most adult Jews hold beliefs that reflect the theological thinking of ten to twelve year olds! Think about this, and, for just a moment, travel back into your childhood. What was your earliest encounter with death? Who died? How did the adults in your life explain to you about the finality of death? What were you told about what happens to people after death? Don't read on just yet . . . Take some time and think about these questions . . . Do you still hold sacred in some secret way the initial teaching offered to you as a child? What do you now think that Jews believe about the afterlife?

There is one additional answer that always emerges when I survey people's views on the afterlife. Invariably, someone tells the story of asking the question of a Hebrew school teacher, a rabbi, or even of one's own parent — "Does Judaism believe in the afterlife?" And, forthrightly, the response comes back:

Judaism celebrates life and the living. It dwells on life here rather than on the hereafter as other religious faiths do. Life is precious, the here and the now.<sup>2</sup>

2. This quotation appeared in 1981 in a newspaper article about a rabbi who had given a lecture on the Jewish approach to bio-medical ethics. When asked by a young nurse,

Although absolutely characteristic of modern Judaism's attitude towards the afterlife, this response is the singularly most problematic belief about life after death in the modern Jewish scene. Why? Because it is simply not true! It is only partially true!! Yes, it is accurate that Judaism has a life-affirming, this-worldly orientation which proclaims the sanctity and significance of physical plane life. This world, which is divinely-given for humanity to enjoy, appreciate and sanctify, has always been very important for Judaism, because within the context of physical, embodied life one can fulfill the divine commandments, or *mizvot*. But to deny or politely by-pass Jewish beliefs in life after death is a pedagogical error promulgated by all too many instructors of Judaism.

As an inadvertent result, both Jews and non-Jews often assume that Judaism does not have any belief in life after death. So we have created a cognitive schizophrenia for modern Jews. On one hand, many hold some very core level beliefs about a dead grandparent or other relative who entered heaven, or the world to come. Yet, on the other hand, people remember having been taught that Judaism is primarily interested in the here and now, and not in heaven and the hereafter.

The result of this is that very often modern Jews experience a kind of intellectual paralysis with regard to the question about life after death. They have been given neither the spiritual motivation nor the textual tools to inquire further about afterlife, spirits and the eternal soul. I believe there is a serious need to re-educate people about the Jewish tradition on life after death. And the main belief that has to be taught is that there is, in actuality, an extensive Jewish tradition on the afterlife journey of the soul. *It is only in the modern times, as a result of scientific rationalism, secularization of religion, and the Holocaust, that it has become progressively more difficult to talk about life after death in Judaism.*

### *The Pre-Modern Jewish Legacy on the Afterlife*

Over the course of four millennia, Judaism evolved and was transformed as it came into contact with various world civilizations. And with this ongoing process of evolution, Jewish theology, language, and culture, as well as Jewish beliefs on the afterlife, continually evolved. A deeper examination of Jewish tradition reveals a vast, ever-changing historical legacy of teachings on the afterlife. Within pre-modern Judaism can be found a plethora of teachings and texts on topics such as immortality of the soul; celestial journeying through heavenly and hell worlds; reincarnation; exorcism of spirits; deathbed stories of famous rabbis as well as innumerable folk tales that reflect a belief in the soul's continued survival after death. Throughout its history, Judaism produced a wide variety of

"Does Judaism believe in an afterlife?" he responded as quoted here. Jean Hershaft, "Patient Should Not Be Told of Terminal Illness: Rabbi," *The Jewish Post and Opinion* (New York), 13 March 1981, p. 12.

sacred writings on death and the afterlife. By way of example, consider the following:

In 1626, in Mantua, Italy, Rabbi Aaron Berachia ben Moses of Modena wrote a text entitled *Ma'avor Yabok*, literally "Crossing the River Yabok." (In Genesis 32 Jacob crosses over the River Yabok and this is the metaphor used in the title of this text.) It is a compilation of writings on death, dying and the philosophy of the afterlife. Based upon the Kabbalistic philosophy of the soul expounded by Isaac Luria, this text describes the experiences of the soul at the time of death, and beyond.<sup>3</sup> More than any other Hebrew book, *Ma'avor Yabok* may be considered as a "Jewish Book of the Dead."

Produced specifically for the *Hevrah Kaddishah*, or Burial Society, of Mantua, this text was rapidly accepted in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish communities. Over the course of two hundred years, *Ma'avor Yabok* was printed in at least twenty-five editions, and became the standard *Hevrah Kaddishah* manual for Jews in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Although untranslated, this text is still in print to this day!

Another text worthy of note is *Nishmat Hayyim*, "The Soul of Life," by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel.<sup>5</sup> Menasseh ben Israel was a scholar, commercial entrepreneur, and political statesman, who negotiated with Oliver Cromwell for permission for Jews to re-enter England. Originally a Marrano who re-embraced Judaism when he migrated from Spain to Amsterdam in the early 1600s, he was the first rabbi and spiritual leader of the Amsterdam Jewish community.<sup>6</sup>

In the author's introduction to *Nishmat Hayyim*, he relates how he was lying awake one night, when a "*Malakh*," angel or spirit guide, appeared to him at his bedside, and dictated to him a treatise on "*din gilgul neshamot*," literally, "the law of the revolution of souls" — reincarnation. *Nishmat Hayyim* is an eclectic text which presents a survey of Jewish beliefs on topics such as: immortality of the soul; the nature of the astral body; the death-moment itself; postmortem judgment; the afterlife wanderings of the soul; and other conceptions of the hereafter found in Rabbinic or Kabbalistic sources.

One final example: During the medieval period there appeared within the Jewish world anthologies of legendary Midrashic writings. Based upon ancient traditions dating back to the start of the Rabbinic era, and earlier, these unique Midrashim were composed sometime after 1000 CE. Unlike earlier Rabbinic writings, these are not homiletical Midrashim, but, rather, legends about Biblical personages and Rabbinic sages, as well

3. Aaron Berechia ben Moshe Mi'Modina, *Ma'avor Yabok* (B'nai Brak: Yishpah, 1967).

4. Jacob R. Marcus, *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1947).

5. Menasseh ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayyim* (New York: Sinai Offset Co., 1965).

6. For biographical information see: Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh Ben Israel* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1934).

as apocalyptic writings on redemption, messianism, and the nature of the supernal worlds. Among these anthologies are a number of texts that describe with ornate detail the afterlife realism of *Gan Eden* — the Garden of Eden, or Paradise — and *Gehenna* — the purgatorial realm.

Consider, for example, the following brief passage characteristic of this genre of literature, taken from a text entitled *The Treatise of Rabbi Yizhak ben Parnach from Gehinnom*:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says that man's merits and sins are not testified to until the day of his death . . . Thus, at his death, three ministering angels come to him, one the angel of death, one a scribe, and a third who is appointed to accompany them. They say to him, "Arise, for your end has come." Then the scribe proceeds to number his days and years. At that moment the man opens his eyes and sees the angel of death, whose length extends from one end of the world to the other: he quakes exceedingly and falls upon his face.<sup>7</sup>

With abundant detail the texts goes on to describe the Divine judgment experienced at the time of death. This text is only one brief example; but there are numerous writings, and various versions of Midrashic texts, which expound upon the fate of the individual at death, and in *Gehenna* and *Gan Eden*. Texts such as the *Treatise of Gan Eden*, *Treatise of Gehenna*, *Treatise of the Judgment of the Grave*, *The Revelation of Moses*, among others,<sup>8</sup> are as visionary and imagistic as anything produced by Dante, but are philosophically grounded in Torah and Talmud.

A closer examination of Jewish sources reveals that not only does Judaism have a belief in the afterlife, but there are also abundant details available on the journeying of the soul in the hereafter. The texts mentioned above are not isolated literary products, but part of an extensive and popularized tradition on the afterlife that has continually grown and changed over the course of three thousand years.

However, in the twentieth century, as the center of Jewish life has shifted from Europe to North America, and from a Hebrew and Yiddish linguistic environment to an English-speaking one, an awareness of these pre-modern teachings on the afterlife has been lost. Even in modern day Israel, it is often difficult to track down copies of some of the medieval mystical texts on death and the afterlife — topics not high on the agenda even in the Orthodox Yeshiva world. Why has modern Judaism lost touch with the vast legacy of philosophical beliefs of the hereafter? Why are so many people surprised to discover the existence of a core of Jewish beliefs on the life after death? And perhaps more importantly, why are well-meaning Jews often left with little choice but to read the Tibetan *Book of*

7. M. Gaster, ed., *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971). Text XII, pp. 29–30.

8. English translations of these texts are found in *Ibid.*, and in Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971). Hebrew texts are found in: Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Beit Ha-Midrash*, Six Volumes (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1967), and Y.D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim* (New York: Grossman, 1915).

*the Dead*, or Yiddish love poetry, when confronted with the spiritual crisis of death and dying?

The answer to this series of questions is not simple. There are both historical and contemporary factors at play affecting modern Jewish views of life after death and, presently, we shall examine some of them.

### *Historical Roots of Jewish Afterlife Teachings*

First of all, it is essential to remember that what we think of today as “Jewish tradition” does not necessarily represent the entire corpus of four thousand years of Jewish thought and experience. As one of my colleagues often reminds me, it is the winners who write history. Throughout Jewish history, specific trends and beliefs that were widespread in one era were rejected, ignored and purged by forces which later emerged as dominant.

For example, monotheistic Biblical writers condemned any and all goddess-worshipping by members of the Israelite nation. Yet, as Raphael Patai has demonstrated, there were periods of time, certainly prior to the writing of the Books of Kings, when this form of fertility-based religious ritual was practiced.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have even suggested that those who worshipped goddesses were possibly involved in ritualistic communication with the dead, and this may have been part of Israelite practice in the centuries after settlement of the land.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at the Rabbinic period, we know that, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Rabbis of Yavneh attempted to establish a comprehensive normative orthodoxy in the Jewish world. In so doing, they rejected a vast collection of Jewish writings known today as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, written (circa) between 300 BCE and 100 CE (called, in Hebrew, *sefarim hizonim* — “extraneous books”).<sup>11</sup> These apocalyptic Jewish texts include material describing the journeying of Biblical

9. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), pp. 16–41.

10. Archaeological research from the Ancient Near East has revealed a structural similarity between the high places, or *bamot*, where the Goddess was worshipped, and un-earthed funeral mounds where evidence suggests that people brought specific foodstuffs to offer to the dead. A number of Biblical scholars have suggested that the *bamot* may have also functioned as burial sites where specific funerary practices of communion with the dead were carried out. See, for example, Rolland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Vol. I & II (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1965), Vol. I, p. 58; Vol II, p. 287; W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: Athlone Press, 1968), pp. 177ff.; *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol. 5, 1167.

11. The Mishnah documents the Rabbinic attitude towards these writings with a rather serious statement to the effect that one who reads the extraneous books (*sefarim hizonim*) shall have no share in the world to come (*Sanh.* x, 1). The term *hizonim* clearly has the connotation of heresy, and in another Mishnaic passage (*Meg.* IV, 8) we find a reference to *hizoniut* — understood here as heresy or sectarianism — i.e., “those who follow their own way and not the ways of the Rabbis” (q.v. Rashi’s commentary on Mishnah *Megillah* IV, 8).



personages through realms of the dead. In spite of their popularity, with the emerging hegemony of the Rabbis after the year 70 C.E., these writings were progressively eliminated from the Jewish tradition of transmission (although *Ben Sira*, for example, is quoted in the Talmud). They are often maintained within the literary traditions of the Ethiopian, Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic Churches. Thus, today, in the Pseudepigraphical text 4 Ezra (a version of which appears in the Catholic Bible as 2 Esdras), one finds the most elaborate description of Jewish afterlife teachings from the first century C.E.<sup>12</sup> Originally written in Hebrew, this text reflects certain streams of philosophical beliefs of the Jewish world in Late Antiquity, and is one of many such texts that were rejected by the Rabbis in canonizing the Torah.

In a similar vein, the magical, mystical streams of Judaism were progressively placed into disrepute by the forces of nineteenth century Has-kalah. Throughout his monumental study, *History of the Jews*, Heinrich Graetz repeatedly denigrated Kabbalistic-mystical Judaism, calling it a "mania" that led to a dark age of moral depravity and fanatical intoxication.<sup>13</sup> Influenced by Graetz, early modern Jewish scholarship gave little credibility to mystical Judaism, and the accompanying philosophies of the afterlife journey of the soul that developed in medieval Kabbalah and eighteenth century Hasidism. However, in the second half of this century, Gershom Scholem pioneered the modern study of Jewish mysticism, and demonstrated the important role that Jewish mystical trends have played throughout Jewish history.<sup>14</sup> While there is a growing contemporary interest in re-discovering the wisdom of Jewish mysticism, as yet few inroads have been made in making Kabbalistic and Hasidic afterlife teachings accessible to the English-speaking Jewish world.<sup>15</sup>

But, historical development and these anti-mystical attitudes are not the whole story. There are other factors, inherent in the Biblical and Rabbinic worldview itself, that led to the de-emphasis of teachings about the fate of the individual after death. The short of it is that both Biblical and Rabbinic literature fostered a penchant for emphasizing philosophies of collective redemption of the Israelites over and above teachings on the

12. 4 Ezra 7:26–140. The Fourth Book of Ezra can be found in: James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. I (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1983), pp. 517ff.

13. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 6 Volumes (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), IV, pp. 617ff.

14. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971). More recently, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

15. Two notable exceptions are Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "Life in the Hereafter — A Tour of What's to Come," in *The Jewish Almanac*, eds. Richard Siegel and Carl Rheins (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 594–596, and Edward Hoffman, *The Way of Splendor — Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1981); see especially Chapter 8: "Life and Death — The Immortal Soul."

personal afterlife destiny of the individual. That requires further explanation.

To begin, let us turn to the Hebrew Bible; what are the teachings on life after death found here? Certainly there are intimations that our Biblical ancestors had some form of belief in a continued existence after death. It is possible to speculate that the Patriarchal concern with burial in the family plot at Machpelah may represent a desire to return to an ancestral realm of the dead. However, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find a fully-articulated philosophy of individual postmortem survival.

In 2 Samuel 28, King Saul goes to the Witch of En-Dor, requesting of her to call up the spirit of the Prophet Samuel from *Sheol* — the post-mortem netherworld — and so she does. While this vignette of Biblical narrative points to the existence of a realm of the dead, Saul's encounter with the Witch of En-Dor highlights the ambivalent Biblical attitude towards any communication with those sojourning in this realm. Even though King Saul consulted with the Witch of En-Dor, he did so in disguise, for he himself had prohibited all forms of necromancy, the oracular consulting of the dead. Thus, we see that, on one hand, there were those who did commune with the dead, and, on the other, there had been an outright official condemnation of this practice. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible there are numerous other passages indicating a prohibition against communication with the ancestral dead,<sup>16</sup> and if prohibition was necessary, then obviously someone was doing what had to be prohibited.

It is accurate to say that early Biblical Judaism did have some primitive conception of an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. However, the belief that the soul separates from the body and survives after death does not appear in the Pentateuch (cf Gen. 1:27), although it is suggested in 1 Sam. 25:29 and Eccl. 4:20–1. Generally speaking it was foreign to early Biblical Judaism, and probably emerged much later, after the sixth century B.C.E. Babylonian Exile.

Another philosophical notion foreign to pre-Exilic Biblical Judaism was the idea of redemption of an individual apart from the nation. In light of the covenant at Sinai, the entire Israelite nation stood in direct relationship with God. God's actions impacted upon the nation as a whole, and vice-versa; the behavior of the Israelites collectively conditioned God's response. The ultimate destiny of the nation is the predominant theme in pre-Exilic Biblical writings rather than concern with the ultimate, personal redemption apart from the nation. Hence, while there are numerous Prophetic teachings about the end-of-days when God will redeem the nation, passages speaking of the ultimate, postmortem fate of the individual are almost totally non-existent.

There is, however, one passage found in the Book of Job that is sug-

16. See, for example, Deut. 26:14; Jer. 16:7; and Hos. 9:4.

gestive of a belief in an individual postmortem immortality. From the depths of his anguish, Job explains:

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,  
And that He will witness my last upon the dust;  
And when after my skin is destroyed,  
Then without my flesh shall I see God. (Job 19:25–26)

In this passage, Job envisions an immortal existence after death with the soul standing in a spiritual relationship with God — “without my flesh shall I see God.” This single reference suggests an individual postmortem immortality, but it is certainly not a clearly-articulated or well-developed philosophy of the afterlife.

Without explaining many of the philosophical intricacies, suffice it to say that the Biblical concern with the fate of the nation eventually led to the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the dead,<sup>17</sup> a belief that, at the end-of days, God will redeem His chosen nation and bring the righteous dead to life. Although there existed a less developed stream of teachings about individual postmortem immortality — what happens to the individual person after death — these teachings were overshadowed by a primary concern for the postmortem fate of the collectivity of Israelites.

When we investigate Rabbinic Judaism, we also find a somewhat ambiguous view of the afterlife. In Rabbinic tradition the term *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, is frequently used in reference to a future postmortem life. But it is often unclear whether this World to Come is inaugurated immediately after an individual’s death, or in the distant future, at the end of time and history when the world will be redeemed.

For example, in one Rabbinic text we find a statement that:

My law will guide you in your path in this world; it will watch over you in your sleep, at the hour of death; and when you wake, it will converse with you in the *Olam Haba* (*Sifre* on Lev. 18:4).

This passage suggests that *Olam Haba* is a postmortem world that one enters immediately after death. However, elsewhere in the Talmud we find passages expressing a different point-of-view.

Not like this world will be the World to Come. In this world one has the trouble to harvest grapes and press them; but in the World to Come a person will bring a single grape in a wagon or a ship, store it in the corner of his house, and draw from it enough wine to fill a large flagon . . . there will not be a grape which will not yield thirty measures of wine (*B. Ket.* 111b).

We see here a clear message that the World to Come is not a postmortem world but, rather, a world that begins at the end of time and history with the onset of the messianic kingdom. It seems more like a time of glob-

17. For more elaborate discussion of this general topic see: R.H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963).

al super-technology than anything having to do with death and life after death.

This is exactly the situation regarding the afterlife found in Rabbinic literature. More often than not, collective and individual eschatological teachings are consistently fused and confused in Talmud and Midrash. In other words, there is no clear distinction made between philosophical teachings on the ultimate fate of the nation at the end of time, and those teachings on the destiny of the individual in the hereafter. If there is a Rabbinic view of an afterlife, why do we not find the rabbis elaborating more specifically on what happens to the individual after the body dies? The reason is, not unlike in Biblical times, that *collective* notions of the afterlife always assumed a priority in Rabbinic literature. The Prophetic vision of a renewed messianic social-political world at the end of time predominated in Jewish eschatological thought for centuries during the development of the Talmud and Midrash (see, e.g., B. San. 99a).

Another reason for the modern confusion about life after death is to be found in the approach to the afterlife of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). As a learned scholar of his age, he endeavored to reconcile Jewish tradition with the emerging philosophical worldview of medieval times. A committed traditional Jew, Maimonides was nonetheless a philosophical rationalist influenced by Aristotelian thought and medieval scholastic philosophy. Many of his views about the nature of reality and human existence reflect a rationalistic perspective that downplays the mystical side of Judaism. In his writings on the afterlife, he affirms the existence of an immortal soul, but he does so in terms of philosophical abstractions that are closer to Thomas Aquinas than to medieval legendary Midrash.

For example, in his *Commentary on the Mishnah-Tractate Sanhedrin*, Maimonides discusses the Rabbinic dictum that: “In *Olam Haba* [the World to Come] there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and they delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence” (*Ber.* 17a). He explicates his philosophical point-of-view as follows: “With their crowns on their heads,” he explains, “means the immortality of the soul, a state of being in which one is in firm possession of the concept of the Creator, blessed be He;” further, “and they delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence” refers to the soul’s blissful delight in knowing the essential nature of the Creator.<sup>18</sup> Notice how the language here is all very lofty and abstract; Maimonides envisions the World to Come in the conceptual framework of the medieval philosophical worldview which places emphasis on acquisition of knowledge and development of intellect as ways of communing with the Divine.

18. Fred Rosner, trans. and ed., *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah — Tractate Sanhedrin* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1981).

Elsewhere, Maimonides speaks of the World to Come as an other-worldly realm, totally beyond human comprehension. "As to the blissful state of the soul in the world to come, there is no way on earth in which we can comprehend or know it," he declares quite explicitly.<sup>19</sup>

Maimonides opposed the growing folk level interest in mythic descriptions of life after death that had become popular in medieval Midrashic writings. As an Aristotelian, he maintained that there was an unbridgeable dualism between matter and spirit, between human and divine realms. Thus, he rejected the use of earthly realm metaphors to describe the afterlife, stating:

... in this earthly existence we only have knowledge of physical pleasure ... But the bliss of the life hereafter is exceedingly great, and can only metaphorically be compared with earthly enjoyments. In reality, however, there is no comparison between the bliss of the soul in the life hereafter and the gratification afforded to the body on earth by food and drink. That spiritual bliss is unsearchable and beyond compare.<sup>20</sup>

Maimonides' writings on the afterlife actually provide very little phenomenological information on what happens to the individual soul after death. As in Rabbinic literature, the focus is on the World to Come at the end-of-days, and not on the fate of the soul immediately after death. Also, the inherent dualism in Maimonides' worldview has wedged a gap between the spiritual and human realms, thereby convincing many people that contemplating the question of life after death is a task beyond human ability.

Today, close to eight hundred years later, Maimonides' belief that the spiritual life of the World to Come is beyond human comprehension persists within Judaism. In spite of the increasing demise of the rationalistic, Aristotelian worldview, we find these philosophical conceptions echoed in *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, by Maurice Lamm, one of the most widely read modern books on death and Judaism. In discussing the afterlife, Lamm reiterates Maimonides' point of view, saying that, in spite of the Jewish belief in immortality, there are no details available on the afterlife. Why? Because "flesh-and-blood man cannot have any precise conception of the pure, spiritual bliss of the world beyond."<sup>21</sup> This is an uncritical acceptance of Maimonides' philosophical rationalism that ignores the mystical, apocalyptic stream of Judaism wherein are found the magnificent textual depictions of the afterlife realms.

As I see it, Maimonides' philosophical dualism actually makes it problematic to understand the nature of Jewish teachings on the afterlife. If the spiritual life of the world-to-come is so lofty, humans cannot even

19. Moses Hyamson, trans. and ed., *Mishneh Torah by Maimonides*, Vol. I: *The Book of Knowledge* (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1965), p. 91a.

20. Ibid.

21. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), p. 225.

come close to understanding it. Thus, with the Maimonidean influence as a background, it is no wonder that modern Jews have trouble reflecting on the whole question of a life after death.

But, in a contemporary culture that is birthing a new paradigm which purports to bridge the spirit-matter chasm, Maimonides' Aristotelian dualism, like Newtonian physics, is no longer adequate. To wrestle effectively with many of the philosophical and spiritual questions of our age, we will have to develop a Jewish model that reflects the emerging consciousness of the late twentieth century. Certainly, with regard to the topic of immortality and life after death, there is no doubt that we have to go beyond Maimonides and beyond the rationalistic stream of Judaism, to discover a way of seeing the afterlife journey of the soul in terms that speak to our contemporary point-of-view.

The historical evidence examined thus far explains why teachings on the afterlife seem vague and obscure to modern Jews. In addition, however, there are contemporary factors which have made it difficult for twentieth century Judaism rightfully and proudly to claim the legacy of Jewish afterlife teachings.

### *Twentieth Century Rationalism*

First of all, with the ascendance of scientific rationalism at the end of the last century, Western intellectual thought discounted the importance of religion and religious experience in an individual's life. The scientific worldview emphasized objective, observable phenomena of human experience, rejecting the relevance of any non-observable, internal, subjective or spiritual phenomena. Sigmund Freud, the atheist Jew who profoundly influenced modern intellectual trends, saw religion as a "universal obsessional neurosis" which reflected a regression to infantile forms of behavior. To relate to God, according to Freud, was but a childish yearning for a relationships with one's father.<sup>22</sup>

In the opening decades of this century, as scientific rationalism, logical positivism, and psychoanalysis became increasingly popular, angels, souls, mystical experience and life after death were eliminated from the agenda of intellectual inquiry. In a scientific, rationalistic universe, death is seen as the final cessation of life. A person dies and that's the end; survival of a soul in the afterlife is a non-option.

There is no doubt that the rationalistic, secularizing forces of modern thought have impacted upon twentieth century Judaism. As a result, it is not only a belief in the afterlife that is problematic for modern Jews, but even more, almost anything to do with questions of faith, God, religious experience and the inner life are perplexing to an entire generation of Jews who were raised spiritually tone-deaf. While the social and intellec-

22. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961; originally published 1927).

tual dimensions of Judaism are addressed in Jewish communities and congregations, spirituality and questions of a personal, intimate relationship with God are often not addressed, except in small pockets of the Jewish community where a relatively recent process of spiritual renewal has begun,<sup>23</sup> and some hasidic groups.

### *Afterlife and the Holocaust*

There is one final factor that has affected modern Judaism's perspective on life after death, and that is the experience and impact of the Holocaust. Undeniably, the Holocaust has been a powerful force operating upon the psyche of twentieth century Jews. The difficulty that modern Jews often encounter in reflecting on the issue of life after death is, in many ways, a direct response to the Holocaust. Think about this for a moment, and ask, as I often do, the following question: "Is there afterlife after Auschwitz?" What a question! You haven't heard it asked before, primarily because after Auschwitz the concern is life and re-birth, not death and the hereafter.

After Auschwitz the spiritual mandate was to re-generate Jewish life, re-settle refugees and build a Jewish homeland. Imagine what it was like in 1945, as the discovery and the liberation of concentration camps began. Could the task at hand have been accomplished if Judaism had a strong philosophical preoccupation with the state of the souls of six million dead?

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the memory of the six million was best honored by affirming the continuity of Jewish existence, not by focusing on the postmortem fate. Such a mission was too monumental and too overwhelmingly painful for contemplating. After Auschwitz, I maintain, it is difficult, if not impossible, for Judaism, collectively, to relate to the idea of an afterlife. Modern Judaism — at least in the forty years after the liberation of the concentration camps — simply could not integrate the Jewish philosophy of the immortal soul with the reality of the Holocaust. So it was best ignored, left to the private sphere but not the public sphere of religious life, except for *Yizkor* services when the six million martyrs were remembered.

The spirit of the times of the fifties, sixties and seventies necessitated building a socially responsive and intellectually viable Judaism. Within the context of a post-World War II North American Judaism, there was no room for a concern with spirituality and disembodied souls in the hereafter. Within the past decade, however, there has been a progressive yearning for spirituality and spiritual renewal. Today, as we stand on the doorstep of the twenty-first century, it is time to re-claim the Jewish tradition on the afterlife. Forty-five years after the Holocaust, we are in a time of societal transformation and spiritual questing, and it is critical that

23. See Arthur Waskow, *These Holy Sparks — The Rebirth of the Jewish People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).



we wrestle with, and learn to understand, the Jewish spiritual legacy that was buried in the ashes of Auschwitz. This era, as a more evolved and accepting approach to death, dying and bereavement is being developed in Western culture, is the opportune time to bring to light the full legacy of Jewish teachings on death and the afterlife.

### *Envisioning the Future*

Oddly enough, there is a very interesting story which suggests that the seeds of rebirth of the Jewish approach to the afterlife emerged out of the Holocaust itself. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the Swiss psychiatrist who is known as “the death and dying lady,” tells the story of her experiences as a relief worker in the Maidanek concentration camp. It was there, in 1945, that she became fascinated with the mystery of the human encounter with death. Surveying the vacant Maidanek, she was overwhelmed with the ever-present stench in the air, the barbed wire, the tall chimney of the crematorium, the boxes of baby shoes, jewelry, and women’s hair, and, above all, with the scribbling found on the walls of the empty barracks. There, amid the graffiti and hundreds of initials carved into the five-tiered wooden bunks, she noticed countless drawings of butterflies! Perhaps days or only hours before dying in the gas chambers, adults and children left behind their final message — butterflies — the symbol of hope, rebirth, the symbol of the eternal human soul. This curious juxtaposition of images of life and death left a profound impression upon the young Kubler-Ross, and ultimately motivated her to study death and dying.<sup>24</sup>

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, she has single-handedly pioneered a profound cultural transformation in attitudes towards the dying and the bereaved. In light of her work with the dying, there are more compassionate, caring approaches to care for the terminally-ill and the grief-stricken. Just as Sigmund Freud altered Western attitudes towards sexuality, Kubler-Ross has broken the cultural taboos surrounding death in our society. She has generated an entire cultural movement dedicated to understanding the nature of the dying experience, and all that it entails for individuals and families dealing with terminal illness. In the wake of her influence, there has been a tremendous burst of creative writings on all facets of death and bereavement. And yet, even though thousands of new publications have been produced documenting psychological, sociological, and spiritual perspectives on death and dying, within the Jewish community relatively little new material has been written in the past two decades. Kubler-Ross herself has written:

24. This story is related in Jack Riemer, ed., *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 1, and Derek Gill, *Quest — The Life of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p. 131.

I have always wondered why the Jews as a people have not written more on death and dying. Who, better than they, could contribute to understanding of the need to face the reality of our own finiteness?<sup>25</sup>

It seems that with Kubler-Ross' cultural influences, the psychic grip of the Holocaust has prevailed and Jews have simply avoided writing on death, dying and the afterlife. But the dearth of Jewish writings on death is a modern phenomenon; within the history of Jewish tradition, there are rich resources not only on the afterlife, but on all aspects of the encounter with death. It is up to the modern generation to rediscover those resources, and reconsider and re-evaluate the attitude of our rabbis — in the distant past, and doubtless for good reasons then — which was so averse to apocalyptic literature.

Perhaps now, as we stand on the verge of the twenty-first century, it is time to begin to extricate ourselves from the psychic shackles of the Holocaust, and to begin a process of integrating traditional Jewish wisdom on death, dying, mourning and the spiritual journey of the soul in the afterlife with new, emerging perspectives on the psychology of death and dying. I believe that the best way to meet this need is to bring to life the rich, unmined legacy of Jewish afterlife teachings. These are found not only in the Bible, Rabbinic literature, and in Maimonides, but in some of the more esoteric and less known corners of Jewish tradition. Guidelines for creating the next generation of Jewish death literature will come from medieval Midrash, from the Zohar and other texts of Jewish mysticism, and from the ancient Jewish apocalyptic writings.

Yes, Judaism does believe in an afterlife! Almost fifty years after Auschwitz it is time to resurrect the ancient Jewish tradition on the afterlife journey of the soul, and to make those teachings available in a language and style appropriate for contemporary Jewish life, in the metaphor of the modern psychology of consciousness. The Tibetan *Book of the Dead* may well be sufficient for Tibetan monks. But now there is a need to develop a Jewish *Book of the Dead* that will be a guide and a manual for dying grandparents and their children and grandchildren. Now we need to bring to life Jewish wisdom on the mysteries of death and the immortal soul, so that the next generation of Jewish life will be lived with greater fullness and with a profound sense of the spiritual significance of life and death.

# *Unbinding Mother Rebekah*

DAVID E. FASS

HOW LONG WAS THE MOMENT WHEN ISAAC lay bound on the altar, his neck exposed to Father Abraham's knife, with all of the Jewish future hanging in the balance? Certainly it was less than a day, probably only minutes or even seconds, before Abraham heard the Divine messenger telling him not to harm the boy; Isaac was unbound, and the clock resumed its ticking (Gen. 22:1–19).

A great deal longer were the moments after the *Akedah*, when the future of Abraham's hope of Jewish peoplehood again hung in doubt. In many ways Isaac remained bound, emotionally, to Esau, a wild, uncivilized person unworthy of Abraham's dream, and tied to his bed as well by illness and old age. Almost as incapable was the simple, timid Jacob, who stayed in camp close to home and hearth (Gen. 25:27–28).

The story of *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, is among the best known and most thoroughly explored in all of Jewish tradition.<sup>1</sup> Less appreciated is Rebekah's role as keeper of Abraham's dream and engineer of the future of the Jewish people. Yet, without her heroic efforts, Isaac might have remained bound to his intent to transmit the leadership of the clan to Esau, Jacob might have remained bound to an unimportant role as just another member of the camp, and the history of the Jewish people as we know it might never have come to be. This is an exploration of Rebekah's unbinding of Isaac, Esau, Jacob, and, most of all, of herself.

Where shall we look for Rebekah's story? The Torah text tells us some of it. We find a good deal more in the Talmud, midrash, and commentaries, the records of generations of Jews resonating with the bare text, and fleshing it out with additional intuitions and insights.

We know of the elderly Abraham's concern with finding a wife for his son, Isaac, and of how he sent an unnamed servant back to the land of his birth to find one (Gen. 24:1–9). We also know a fair amount about the subservient position of women in the Ancient Near East and about some of the constraints upon them in patriarchal society. As was the case with most of the women of her era, Rebekah remained bound up in the control of others. As she left her home to go and marry Isaac, she was accompanied a short way by the emissaries of

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1. See, for example, among the myriad references to the *Akedah*, Shalom Spiegel's masterful volume, *The Last Trial* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967).

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DAVID E. FASS is *Rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom, New City, N.Y.*

her father's household, who delivered her directly into the custody of Abraham's servants, who delivered her to Isaac.<sup>2</sup>

As a woman, she was seen as a frail and vulnerable creature, especially in terms of her sexuality. When she first saw her future husband she was so overcome with awe that she slipped from the camel on which she was riding. The fall injured her in the groin, rupturing her hymen.<sup>3</sup> Of course, Isaac would never believe such a story, in spite of Rebekah's pleading and swearing. He came to believe her only when she showed him the tree stump on which she had fallen, still wet with her blood.<sup>4</sup> There was always a suspicion that she might have been used by a man, perhaps even the trusted servant who brought her back from Abraham's homeland. Because of this, on her arrival Isaac had to perform a digital pelvic examination to assure himself of Rebekah's virginity.<sup>5</sup>

That Rebekah managed to exercise power in spite of the traditional constraints on women is impressive enough. But she had even more to contend with. She was also saddled with a family background of highly questionable morality. The greed of her brother Laban comes through directly from the text and is noted by the commentators. When Laban saw the gifts that Abraham's servant gave Rebekah, he ran out immediately to be part of the action (Gen. 24:29–31).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, when the servant made his formal request to take Rebekah back as Isaac's wife, Laban rushed in to answer, seemingly usurping the prerogatives of his father, Bethuel.<sup>7</sup>

The midrash further expounds on the immorality of Rebekah's family from hints found in the text. Both Laban and Bethuel responded affirmatively to the request for Rebekah (24:50), yet the next morning, when the servant wanted to leave, it was only her mother and brother who asked him to tarry (24:55). What happened to Bethuel? The greedy Laban put a plate of poisoned food before the servant, intending to kill him and take whatever riches the man was carrying. But the servant was guarded by the Archangel Gabriel, who switched the poisoned plate with Bethuel's. He died instantly and, so, was missing from the group the next morning.<sup>8</sup>

Laban's evil permeates the story. When Rebekah made ready to

2. Malbim *ad* Gen. 24:59,61.

3. Yaakov Culi, *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*, tr. by Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1977), 2:433-4, hereafter, TA.

4. Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York: Greenwich House, 1963), p. 185.

5. *Pirke de Rebbe Eliezer* (hereafter PRE), chap. 16.

6. Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:29; Malbim *ad* Gen. 24:30–31.

7. Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:50. An alternative explanation of Laban's prominence in the story comes via evidence in the Nuzi archives regarding the institution of "fratriarchy," in which it was the brother who ruled the clan in the father's place. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 174.

8. PRE chapter 16.

leave her family to go to her new husband, Laban (and Rebekah's mother) "blessed" her (24:60). Laban's blessing was delivered with such sarcasm that it turned out to be a curse instead, the result of which was that Rebekah was barren for many years.<sup>9</sup> Laban's evil is also an explanation for how a righteous woman such as Rebekah could have had a wicked son like Esau. In her genealogy, Rebekah is presented not only as the daughter of Bethuel, but the sister of Laban as well (25:20). Since most boys take after their mother's brothers, the character of Esau is thereby explained.<sup>10</sup> Echoes of Laban's evil and trickery continue throughout the story of Jacob.<sup>11</sup>

Lest one wonder why Bethuel received a punishment seemingly more proper for Laban, he indeed deserved to die, and his death was needed at that particular time. According to legend, Rebekah turned three years of age on that day, eligible to be deflowered by her own father. He would have been motivated to do so on two counts: as the king, who had the right to deflower all the women in his realm, and as an Aramean father, among whose people the custom was prevalent. His death at that particular moment was designed to spare Rebekah this terrible violation.<sup>12</sup>

It was good, though, that Rebekah was young and Isaac was, according to the text, forty years old when he married her (25:20). The disparity in their ages, combined with the wisdom of his years, enabled Isaac to train Rebekah properly in order to overcome the natural tendencies towards evil that she had inherited from her parents.<sup>13</sup> Her father, the *Arami* (Aramean), was also considered (based on an inversion of the Hebrew letters) a *ram'ai* (rogue), as were the rest of her kinfolk.<sup>14</sup>

Even the inability to have children was attributable to Rebekah's questionable background. When she and Isaac prayed for an end to their childlessness, it was his prayers, not Rebekah's, that had the desired effect. His merit was greater than hers, since he was a righteous offspring of righteous parents while she was the righteous offspring of wicked parents.<sup>15</sup> And even when she became pregnant, Rebekah's questionable background continued to cause trouble. According to one modern commentator, it was the non-kosher food that she had been used to eating in her parents' home that was responsible for the wicked Esau. Only

9. *Gen. Rab.* 60:13.

10. Eli Munk, *Kol Hatorah* (Jerusalem; N.Y.: Feldheim, 1980) *ad Gen.* 25:20; Sforno, *ad Gen.* 25:20.

11. See especially *Gen.* 29:1–30, 30:25–36.

12. See *B. Ned.* 44b; Munk *ad Gen.* 24:16; *B. Soferim* 43b; Graves and Patai, *Op. cit.*, p. 184.

13. Munk *ad Gen.* 25:20.

14. *Gen. Rab.* 63:4; *Lev. Rab.* 23:1p; *Song of Songs Rab.* #2, 2:1, *ad Gen.* 25:20.

15. *B. Yev.* 64a; Rashi *ad Gen.* 25:21; Munk, *ad Gen.* 25:21.

the switch to a proper diet in Isaac's household allowed her to conceive Jacob.<sup>16</sup>

These, then, were the ties from which tradition suggests that Rebekah had to unbind herself: her second-class position as a woman, and the immorality of her family background. She is presented in our sources as a person uniquely capable of doing just that. The whole purpose of the genealogy given in Gen. 22:20–24 is only to introduce Rebekah.<sup>17</sup> She was of royal lineage, the daughter of a king.<sup>18</sup> So great was her merit that when her father, Bethuel, opposed her marriage, God had an angel kill him.<sup>19</sup> God was also personally involved in drawing her away from her problematic background and allowing her to become better than the evil-doers among whom she was raised.<sup>20</sup> Rebekah is referred to as “daughter of Bethuel” (Gen. 25:20), when the reader has already been informed of this earlier (Gen. 22:23), in order to stress that though she came from a wicked family she did not follow their teachings.<sup>21</sup>

Rebekah is seen as a saintly person deserving of miracles. When she came out to the well in her first encounter with Abraham's servant, one of the signs that she was the one destined for Isaac was that the waters of the well rose up on their own.<sup>22</sup> It was difficult for her to conceive because she lacked an ovary, so God made her one,<sup>23</sup> just as had been the case with Abraham's wife, Sarah.<sup>24</sup> From the outset, it was Rebekah, not Rachel and Leah, who was destined to be the mother of the twelve tribes of Israel,<sup>25</sup> but she was prevented from doing so because of the cruelty of the wicked Esau. As he emerged from within her, he purposely tore Rebekah's womb so severely that she never conceived again.<sup>26</sup> Her special qualities included that of prophecy, which is how she knew to favor Jacob and beware of Esau.<sup>27</sup>

All of these wonderful propensities would have been for naught had not Rebekah also had the courage to use them. Time after time she was willing to take the initiative, unwilling to allow herself to remain bound by constraints of gender or background. She is, in fact, portrayed in many of the same terms used to describe Abraham's pioneering ini-

16. Isaac Unterman, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1973), *Genesis*, p. 194.

17. Rashi *ad* Gen. 22:23; Ramban, *ad* Gen. 22:23.

18. PRE, chap. 16.

19. *Gen. Rab.* 60:12; Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:55.

20. *Zohar Hayei Sarah* 132a.

21. *Gen. Rab.* 63:4; Rashi *ad* Gen. 25:20; Malbim *ad* Gen. 25:20; *Zohar Toldot* 136b.

22. Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:17.

23. *Gen. Rab.* 63:5.

24. *Gen. Rab.* 53:5.

25. *Gen. Rab.* 63:6 *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* (hereafter PRK), 3:1.

26. *Pesikta Rabbati* (hereafter PR) 12:4; PRK, 3:1.

27. *Gen. Rab.* 67:9; Rashi *ad* Gen. 27:42; *Midrash Tehillim* (hereafter MT) 9:7; 105:4.

tiative towards Jewish peoplehood. Even the blessing that God bestowed upon Abraham in Gen. 22:17, “Your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes,” is repeated almost *verbatim* to Rebekah as she leaves her family to go and marry Isaac.<sup>28</sup> In some ways she even surpassed Abraham, compensating for his failings. When the three “messengers” came to Abraham, he did not bring them water himself, but had a servant fetch it (Gen. 18:4). Rebekah made good on Abraham’s “failing” by herself bringing Abraham’s servant water to drink.<sup>29</sup>

Her actions at the well were clear and decisive. In just four verses there are eleven verbs of action and one of speech. This is a pattern which we will see again at another crucial moment in Rebekah’s story, as she prepares Jacob to manipulate Isaac into giving him the blessing.<sup>30</sup> It is fitting that she exhibited such initiative, for “Rebekah is to become the shrewdest and most potent of the matriarchs.”<sup>31</sup>

She is very much in charge of the area in which women were most vulnerable in the ancient world: her sexuality. The text is careful to specify that she was “a virgin, no man had known her” (Gen. 24:16). The midrash explains the seeming redundancy of the two terms as referring to the licentiousness of the Canaanite women. They refrained from vaginal intercourse in order to preserve their hymens and, hence, their bride-price, but allowed themselves almost every other variety of sexual activity. Rebekah, the midrash contends, allowed no sexual advances of any kind until her marriage to Isaac.<sup>32</sup>

Her strength and willingness to take the initiative is evident from her response to Abraham’s servant. She was apparently so pleased at the thought of leaving her family that she jumped at the chance of going off to marry Isaac, even before knowing exactly who the servant was.<sup>33</sup> He gave her some presents, and it seems that, in accepting them, Rebekah initiated her own betrothal, certainly an unusually forthright act for that time and place.<sup>34</sup> When she then told her family (Gen. 24:28) what happened, she told them her version, structuring things as she wanted them to be perceived, and playing down her audacity in betrothing herself.<sup>35</sup> When, as custom apparently required, her family asked for her approval for the marriage, Rebekah clearly indicated

28. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 161.

29. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach Series* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mesorah Publications, 1978), *ad* Genesis 24:18.

30. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), pp. 53-4.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

32. *Gen. Rab.* 60:5.

33. PRE, chap. 16.

34. This is Ginzberg’s reading of *Gen. Rab.* 60:5-6. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1968), vol. V, p. 261, n. 291.

35. TA, vol. 2, *ad* Gen. 24:28.



that not only did she consent, but she was going to marry Isaac even if her family did not approve.<sup>36</sup> Although it was the custom that the bride be veiled and brought to the groom's tent,<sup>37</sup> it was Rebekah who performed this act herself upon first seeing Isaac (Gen. 24:65–7),<sup>38</sup> yet another example of her taking the initiative rather than being acted upon by others.

One modern commentator sees “resoluteness” as Rebekah’s outstanding quality. He notes that even at the most crucial and even dangerous moments of her life, such as during her difficult pregnancy, she herself went to inquire about what was happening to her (Gen. 25:22–3); she did not send her husband, and did not even tell him the important message that she had been given about the “two nations” in her womb, “and the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). She drew her own conclusions and kept her own counsel.<sup>39</sup> So foreign to much of our tradition was a female’s exercise of self-determination, that Ramban, for instance, suggests that Rebekah *never* told Isaac about God’s prediction — first, out of wifely modesty, and second, because Isaac was a far greater prophet and would therefore be aware of this anyway!<sup>40</sup>

For all of her wonderful qualities, for all of her courage in freeing herself from the bonds of family and gender-dictated role, for all of her exercise of initiative, Rebekah had a very complex situation to deal with: her husband, Isaac.

Isaac and Rebekah are studies in opposites, opposites of each other, and both the opposite of their own parents. Abraham “was the embodiment of supernal grace,” though Isaac represented severity.<sup>41</sup> Rebekah originated from severity, but broke away and became gracious and kind. “If not for her gentleness the world would not have been able to endure the severity inherent in Isaac. In this manner, God constantly mates couples of opposing natures . . . ”<sup>42</sup>

Although Rebekah was dazzled by her first sight of Isaac, clad in his *tallit* (prayer shawl) and looking like an angel,<sup>43</sup> the truth is that he was a deeply flawed human being, though largely through no fault of his own.

The most important story in the Bible about Isaac is one in which he plays a passive role . . . [B]orn when his parents were of advanced

36. Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:58; Malbim *ad* Gen. 24:58.

37. W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), pp. 160, 166.

38. Sarna, *JPS Torah, Genesis*, p. 170.

39. Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images, Men and Women of the Book*, trans. by Yehuda Hanegbi and Yehudit Keshet (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1984), pp. 41, 43.

40. Ramban *ad* Gen. 27:4.

41. Zohar *Toldot* 137a.

42. *Ibid.*

43. MT, 90:18.

age . . . a reward for his [Abraham's] virtues, Isaac thus belonged to Abraham in a special sense . . . Isaac never really had a life of his own. He stood forever in the shadow of those two great fathers, Abraham and God . . . He remained a nonentity . . . So little was there to tell about him that the . . . Bible, as if in an effort to cover up this painful deficiency, [relates] a few events regarding him that are repetitions of what happened to Abraham, and give him a few of the virtues that clung so abundantly to his father's name.<sup>44</sup>

Isaac's lifetime was a series of tragedies and traumas, beginning even before the *Akedah*. It is possible that he was sodomized by his older brother, Ishmael, when he was still only two or three years old.<sup>45</sup> The traumatic aspects of the *Akedah* are fully attested to in any number of places. Isaac's blindness may have come about because the angels' tears fell upon him as he lay bound on the altar.<sup>46</sup> Or, it may have been due to his looking up and seeing the Divine Presence.<sup>47</sup> However, it may have been due to his blind devotion to the wicked Esau.<sup>48</sup>

The trauma of the *Akedah* involved not just Isaac's father, Abraham, but his mother, Sarah, as well. Because he was helplessly bound on an altar, his mother died. One version says that Sarah died when Satan told her that Abraham had, indeed, killed Isaac on the altar.<sup>49</sup> But another source has Sarah dying even though it is Isaac, very much alive, who tells his mother of his brush with death.<sup>50</sup> The trauma of the near-sacrifice is thus deeply compounded by pain and guilt over Sarah's death.

One of Rebekah's primary virtues as a wife was that she appeared to Isaac exactly like Sarah.<sup>51</sup> Rebekah was to compensate for the loss of his mother, and help heal his pain. It was a marriage long in coming. As the text tells us (Gen. 25:20), Isaac was forty years old before he married. He waited, says the midrash, because he wanted to be able to spend his time studying in the academy without the burdens of family responsibility.<sup>52</sup> He was not allowed to leave and go seek a wife on his own because, ever since the *Akedah*, he was considered an *olah*, an offering consecrated to God.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, once married, Isaac and Rebekah were unable to have children for the first twenty years of their marriage. "Isaac pleaded with the

44. Dorothy F. Zeligs, *Psychoanalysis and the Bible* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1974), pp. 36–7 (1988 edition).

45. I intend to explore this hypothesis more fully in a forthcoming article on the incident of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:8–21).

46. *Gen. Rab.* 65:7.

47. PRE, chap. 32; *Gen. Rab.* 65:10.

48. PR, 47:3.

49. PRE, chap. 32.

50. *Lev. Rab.* 20:2.

51. *Zohar Hayei Sarah* 133a; Rashi *ad* Gen. 24:67.

52. TA, *ad* Gen. 25:20.

53. *Gen. Rab.* 64:3.

Lord *on behalf of his wife*, because she was barren . . . ” (Gen. 25:21) (emphasis added), so sure was he that Rebekah was the one who was sterile.<sup>54</sup> Why, then, did not Isaac take another wife, or a concubine, like his father before him and his son Jacob after him? His consecrated status may have made him ineligible for concubines, but there was nothing to prevent him from taking another wife. The Zohar tries to compensate by giving Isaac a number of “mystical” wives, so that he becomes equal to Abraham and Jacob.<sup>55</sup>

But of course he was not equal. Something was wrong. Isaac was the one who was barren, and he knew it. That is why he waited so long to marry, and took only one wife.<sup>56</sup> If his barrenness consisted of a low sperm count or defective sperm, Isaac could not have known. But if he was unable to get an erection, or got one only rarely, this is something of which he would have been aware.

Evidence for Isaac’s impotence is found, strangely enough, in an incident in which he and Rebekah are said to have had sexual intercourse, apparently wantonly and in public (Gen. 26:6–11). This vignette is the third time that the so-called “Wife-Sister Motif” appears in Genesis. The first two times, Abraham presented Sarah as his sister rather than his wife, hoping, for reasons not entirely clear, to protect both of them.

The third presentation, although of the same genre as the earlier two, has a separate purpose: to depict Isaac’s inadequacies.<sup>57</sup> In the first two stories (Gen. 12:10–20 and 20:1–18), Abraham receives gifts of great value. Here, Isaac receives nothing.<sup>58</sup> In spite of God’s promise of protection, Isaac still manages to endanger himself and his family.<sup>59</sup> But strangest of all is the text’s report that “. . . Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looking out of the window, saw Isaac “sporting” or “playing” (*me-zahek*) with his wife Rebekah” (Gen. 26:8). What were they doing? Whatever they were doing, why were they doing it where they could be so easily seen?

It seems obvious that they were having intercourse, though the *Zohar* goes to great lengths to deny any such understanding, stating that Abimelech looked out of the window and saw the stars, not Isaac and Rebekah. By means of astrology he divined that they were husband and wife.<sup>60</sup> The *Zohar* doth protest too much, for the Hebrew *me-zahek* is a technical term that does, indeed, mean sexual intercourse.<sup>61</sup>

54. *Zohar Toldot* 137b.

55. *Zohar Hayei Sarah* 133a–b.

56. *B. Yev.* 64a.

57. Daniel H. Gordis, “Lies, Wives and Sisters: The Wife-Sister Motif Revisited,” *JUDAISM*, no. 135, vol. 34 #3 (Summer, 1985): 351.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 358.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

60. *Zohar Toldot* 140b.

61. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (KTAV Publishing House, 1967), p. 308, n. 63.

Like its Ugaritic cognate, *zahek* has the connotation of exultation, sexual exaltation. Isaac, it seems, was exulting in his sexual potency with his wife.<sup>62</sup> This is even more mysterious. How are we to understand Isaac's seeming lack of self control, coupling wildly with his wife where they could be seen without preserving the proper modesty? But if Isaac was usually impotent, full arousal would call for immediate action. Perhaps it was their overwhelming desire for children, rather than wild sexual abandon, that caused Isaac and Rebekah to give so little attention to privacy. Commentators suggest that this incident actually took place *before* Jacob and Esau were born, or how could Isaac have passed Rebekah off as his sister? The text seems to be out of order in that we read of the twins' birth before this incident.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it may have been this one act of exultant potency through which they were conceived.

What of Isaac's impotence? Our sources give us hints as to its cause, and modern medicine helps us understand it even more fully. Both Isaac's impotence and his blindness seem to have been the result of the same condition: diabetes. The Talmud points to an hereditary quality to Isaac's blindness, suggesting that it was the result of a curse that Abimelech had placed on Isaac's mother, Sarah, for causing him so much trouble.<sup>64</sup> Ibn Ezra suggests the "secret" interpretation that Isaac's eyesight was weak because he was a child of Abraham's old age, i.e., that he was genetically defective.<sup>65</sup> Others understand that Isaac had a disease, the symptoms of which were a ravenous appetite and a loss of visual acuity.<sup>66</sup>

The desire for game, as amply noted,<sup>67</sup> may have been an echo of the hunger and thirst that often accompany diabetes. Sforino suggests that Jacob may have been able to fool Isaac about his identity, through the ruse of putting goat-skins on his arms, because Isaac's sense of touch had deteriorated. Neuropathy, like retinopathy, is a result of diabetes. So is impotence.<sup>68</sup>

What was Rebekah's response to her husband's illness? What was her response to Isaac's preference for Esau, the virile Esau with six wives and many children (Gen. 36:2–5, 10–14) who brought food to try and satisfy his sick father's cravings?

Just as Isaac is known forever as the one who was bound, Rebekah

62. Aaron Lichtenstein, "Isaac and Laughter," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Dor LeDor XVIII:1, (Fall 1989): 13–18.

63. Sarna, *Op. cit.*, p. 184.

64. B. *Bab. Kam* 93a; B. *Meg.* 15a, 28a.

65. Charles B. Chavel, tr., *Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Genesis* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), p. 132, n. 75.

66. TA *ad* Gen. 27:3–4.

67. Ramban *ad* Gen. 25:28.

68. The suggestion that Isaac's blindness, impotence, and other problems are the result of diabetes mellitus is found in a short, brilliant article: S. Levin, "Isaac's Blindness: A Medical Diagnosis," *JUDAISM*, no. 145, vol. 37, #1 (Winter, 1988): 81–3.

may be seen as the one whose task it was to unbind. As we have seen, she was the opposite of Isaac<sup>69</sup> and, in her identification with Sarah, the mother who gave birth to much of what Isaac was.<sup>70</sup> She was also intimately connected with Isaac's binding, the *Akedah*, from the moment of her birth. The early genealogy in which Rebekah and her father, Bethuel, are mentioned (Gen. 22:20–24), serves to construct a link between Rebekah's birth and the *Akedah*.<sup>71</sup> Tradition affirms that Rebekah was born just at the time that Isaac returned from his harrowing experience on Mt. Moriah. Just by being born, she “freed” him from the possibility of marrying one of the local Canaanite women.<sup>72</sup>

As already seen,<sup>73</sup> when Rebekah left her home to go to marry Isaac, she was blessed in the same terms used to bless Abraham at the conclusion of the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:17). Though Isaac was to be blessed with increased offspring for the sake of his father, Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Rebekah also had to receive the same blessing because she was the unbinder, the one who could free Isaac, as far as was possible, from the ties that bound him. Isaac's potency was so questionable that she had to be the guarantor of Abraham's dream of Jewish peoplehood.

When Rebekah entered Isaac's world she entered also the saga of Mt. Moriah. For Abraham, it was the place to which God directed him in order to sacrifice Isaac. For Jacob, it was Beth El, a place of vision and of God's presence. For Isaac, it was a place to which he remained bound, going back again and again, probably in an attempt to free himself from the trauma of the *Akedah*. This was the “field” from which he was returning (Gen. 24:63) when Rebekah first saw him.<sup>74</sup> In order to give birth and understand birth, Mt. Moriah, site of the *Akedah*, became the center of Rebekah's concern. When Isaac and Rebekah prayed for children, it was there that they went. When Rebekah was pregnant and did not understand the unusual turmoil within her, she went yet again to Mt. Moriah to inquire.<sup>75</sup>

Her role as one who unbinds others may even be referred to in her name. One possible etymology for *Rivkah* (the Hebrew form of Rebekah) derives from a root that means “to loop a cord over the head of a lamb or a kid.”<sup>76</sup> This was, indeed, what happened to her. Her life's work was to remove the ties that bound from around her own neck and from the necks of those related to her, so that one of them at least, Jacob, might become free enough to found a people.

69. See notes 41 and 42.

70. See notes 24, 25, and 51.

71. Sarna, *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

72. Rashi *ad* Gen. 25:20.

73. See note 28.

74. B. *Pes.* 88a.

75. PRE, chap. 32.

76. Sarna, *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

Jacob, too, was a thorny knot for Rebekah to untie, a source of great triumph for her as well as searing anguish. The midrash views him as having been born circumcised,<sup>77</sup> a favored child, doted upon and spared even the pain of the loss of his foreskin. He was not a person who took the initiative easily, being, instead, an *ish tam*, a mild man, who stayed in camp (Gen. 25:27). He was an innocent fellow who did not seem to be able to deal with the moral ambiguities of the real world.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, he did begin to show some initiative in cooking up a red lentil stew<sup>79</sup> (Gen. 25:29–34). One source says that he made the stew as part of the meal of consolation for his father, Isaac, who was returning from Abraham's funeral. When Esau insisted on having that very bowl, rather than waiting for his brother to cook up another batch as he offered to do, Jacob became willing to risk disappointing their father for his own profit.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps he made that particular red stew because his wild, favored elder brother, Esau, was red and ruddy, as was noted from the moment of his birth (Gen. 25:25). The stew may have been Jacob's main prop in a bit of sympathetic magic designed to enhance his position by weakening Esau.<sup>81</sup> It is more probable, though, that Jacob made that red stew to become strong like Esau, whose power seemed to have come via his ruddiness. Evidence is lent to this possibility by the understanding that the lentils which were easily available to Jacob were yellowish red or light brown. For the deep red color that the story specifies, he would either have had to procure Egyptian lentils, which are red, or add something to the stew to make it red.<sup>82</sup> In either case, Jacob's actions give evidence that he was purposely concocting a "red, red" stew, not just a simple meal.

Rebekah's dilemma was how to see to it that her innocent, naive son fulfilled the destiny that she believed was his since before his birth (Gen. 25:23). This was even more difficult, of course, because there was an older brother, and Isaac made it very clear which one he preferred. Perhaps the incident with the stew gave Rebekah a clue: could she get Jacob to be the hero that he needed to be? Could Jacob decisively best Esau, replacing him as the important one in Isaac's eyes as well? The entire future of the Jewish people depended on a positive answer to both of these questions. There was nothing automatic about the prophecy of Jacob's place in history. He was liable to fail. His hegemony was entirely conditional, and he was to lead only if he proved worthy.<sup>83</sup>

77. *Gen. Rab.* 63:7; MT 9:7.

78. On the use of *tam* as "innocent," see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1981), p. 43.

79. Zlotowitz and Scherman, *ad Gen.* 25:29.

80. TA, *ad Gen.* 25:31.

81. *Zohar Toldot* 139a–b.

82. Sarna, *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

83. MT 9:7.

Rebekah's solution was brilliant. Isaac, old and bedridden, probably in the throes of an especially severe bout of his illness, wished to bless Esau before he died, so he sent him out to hunt game with which to prepare a meal to be eaten upon the bestowal of the blessing. Rebekah overheard, and, instead, sent Jacob in, with a dish of savory goat meat in hand and goat skins on his arms and neck. He was supposed to fool Isaac, usurp his brother's prerogative, and thereby receive the blessing for himself (Gen. 27:1–28:9).

Jacob worried that if Isaac was not fooled, he would curse rather than bless him, but Rebekah replied that she would be the one cursed instead, if only Jacob would do what she asked (27:11–13). She was willing to choose

... against herself ... in order to guide her son into the guilty act that will take him into life and the fulfillment of his destiny ... She is like Eve tempting Adam to the necessary act.<sup>84</sup>

It was not easy. Jacob's reticence was so great that it seemed as if Rebekah had to put right into his hand the food which he was to bring to Isaac.<sup>85</sup> He was so frightened that he wept as his mother tried to give him instructions as to how to handle his father.<sup>86</sup> Jacob does seem to have taken some initiative, though its meaning may remain ambiguous; Rebekah gave him bread and meat, but Jacob also gave Isaac wine (27:25). Was he trying to make sure that his father would be more easily fooled by getting him drunk? The midrash would like to reject Jacob's knowing participation, and so suggests that not only did the wine appear miraculously, but it was also of a special kind that produced blessing rather than inebriation.<sup>87</sup>

Rebekah had a number of other problems beyond Jacob's reticence and minimal participation in her plan. Not only did she have to trick Jacob into trying out the role of the hero that was destined for him, but she also had to enlist Isaac's help so as not to rob him of the little dignity which he had left. This she did by means of the goat skins that she placed on Jacob's arms and neck.

Supposedly this was so that he would seem hairy like Esau, should Isaac, in his blindness, touch him to see which son it was. But the goat skins were not to fool Isaac. Quite the contrary. They were for the purpose of letting Isaac know what was going on, a clue and silent plea from Rebekah to the ailing Patriarch to play along and help fool Jacob. As Reuben Bulka points out, blindness is often accompanied by an increase in the acuity of the other senses. Isaac ought to have been better able to distinguish Jacob's voice from that of Esau.<sup>88</sup> Even if

84. H. Westman, *The Springs of Creativity* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), pp. 144–5.

85. Scherman and Zlotowitz, *ad Gen.* 27:17.

86. TA, *ad Gen.* 27:13.

87. See Munk *ad Gen.* 27:25.

88. Reuben P. Bulka, "Isaac's Blessing — Who Was Deceived?" *Dor LeDor*, vol. XVII:3 (Spring, 1989): 185–189.



we assume that his diabetic neuropathy made him incapable of distinguishing hairy arms from goat skin-covered ones,<sup>89</sup> there was always the stench of the fresh skins themselves. When Isaac exclaims, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed" (Gen.27:27), he is being entirely sardonic. This is a textual aside to the reader, indicating that Isaac knows full well what is going on. Tradition is so aware of the problem of Isaac's seeming unawareness that it was skins that he was touching, that the smell of the goat skins must be "solved" by a miracle: the stench is turned into the same aroma of Paradise that Isaac sensed on Mr. Moriah. Having been given a sign, he bestowed the blessing without hesitation.<sup>90</sup>

It has long been suggested that Isaac was not fooled, even guessing that the whole thing was Rebekah's doing and hinting at this in his questions to Jacob.<sup>91</sup> The commentators focused on the differences between Jacob and Esau to show that Isaac could not possibly have been fooled. Jacob mentioned God (27:20) whereas Esau would not have; Jacob spoke in a pleasant voice, while Esau spoke harshly, etc.<sup>92</sup>

No, it was not Isaac who was fooled. Who was? Bulka suggests that the focus of the entire incident was Esau: "If the father had come to Esau and told him directly that he is not to be given the primary blessing, this would have been a crushing blow to Esau."<sup>93</sup> But this position is untenable for two reasons. First, the text nowhere demonstrates Bulka's sensitivity to Esau's feelings. Secondly, if the concern is over how Esau might feel, it hardly seems to matter, in terms of his anger and anguish, whether his brother stole the blessing or Isaac made a conscious choice to give it to Jacob. In fact, Esau's wrath would have been better inhibited if it had been Isaac's conscious choice. How could he have acted against his old, sick father? Yet, if Jacob were the culprit, his murderous fury could rage unchecked.

No, Esau was not the focus. It was Jacob, as it had been all along. Rebekah's task was exceedingly complex: how to get Jacob to act the hero, how to get Isaac to confirm Jacob's status in his capacity of male, father, and patriarch of the clan, how to deal with the inevitable anger on the part of Esau, and how to protect Jacob as the carrier of Abraham's vision?

Rebekah may, indeed, have agitated earlier for her younger son's elevation to superior status, using the lentil stew incident as evidence both of Jacob's character and Esau's unworthiness.<sup>94</sup> But, apparently,

89. This is at least a possibility, since the text makes us aware that, since he was bedridden, his legs were affected (27:31). If so, why not his other extremities, also?

90. *Gen. Rab.* 65:22; Munk *ad Gen.* 27:28. See also n. 40 (Isaac prophetically knew that Jacob was destined to prevail over Esau).

91. *Gen. Rab.* 67:2.

92. Rashi *ad Gen.* 27:21-27; Ramban *ad Gen.* 27:12.

93. Bulka, *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

neither Isaac nor Jacob was as yet convinced, or there would have been no need for the “death-bed blessing” incident. At a particularly vulnerable moment, when Isaac thought he was about to die, Rebekah dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothes and sent him to his father. The clothes, which Isaac could identify by touch (27:21), said to him: “See, this one can assume the role of the other, and even has the courage to do so.” They also said: “See, this younger son wants to lead so badly that he even has the courage to stand up to you, to try and fool you, his father.”

The goat skins carry a different message. They constitute the signature on the letter which Rebekah sent. The midrash connects goats with Rebekah. One of the provisions of Isaac’s dowry to her was a daily allotment of two kids.<sup>95</sup> As noted earlier, one possible etymology of her name refers to looping a cord over the head of a lamb or a kid.<sup>96</sup> The goat skins tell Isaac that this is Rebekah’s doing. It is her desire that he affirm Jacob, not Esau, as leader. They also convey to him, at this especially vulnerable moment, an even more powerful message. “Turn Jacob loose,” they say. “Free him from his innocence. Do not bind him, Isaac, as you were bound on Mt. Moriah. Do not let him remain a member of the flock, to be led around by a rope, tied for the slaughter as you were. Esau is already free, and wild, and off on the hunt. Now free your other son, untie him, and let him found a people,” the goat skins say.

Rebekah’s genius is effective. Isaac finally gives in and allows Jacob to think that he has fooled his father and, so, is indeed, worthy of the leadership status that receiving the blessing of the first-born confers. That is what we infer from Isaac’s actions upon Esau’s return. True, Isaac does tremble violently (27:33), but it may have been a purposeful ruse, or related to his illness and part of the effort of sitting up, or evidence of the difficulty of what Isaac had just done — a post-effort shudder, as it were. But trembling or not, he nonetheless, against all reason, insisted that the original blessing must stand (*Ibid.*), managing to eke out only a token blessing for Esau.<sup>97</sup>

But all was not yet well. True, Jacob emerged triumphant from his encounter with Isaac, “... crowned like a bridegroom, and like a bride in her adornment ... and ... became a mighty hero ...”<sup>98</sup> But the transformation was by no means complete or permanent. After Esau returned, Rebekah had to call for Jacob because he was off hiding somewhere, presumably in fright.<sup>99</sup> There is no magic here, just the

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Gen. Rab.* 65:14.

96. See n. 76.

97. Bulka, *Op. cit.*, p. 185.

98. PRE, chap. 32.

99. Ramban *ad Gen.* 27:42.

slow and painful struggle of fallible human beings to grow and mature. Jacob's struggles will continue to unfold for many, many more years.<sup>100</sup>

Now Rebekah was faced with another task: helping Jacob grow into the role which he had just acquired. To do so, she of course had to keep him safe from his brother's wrath. Esau was so angry that he threatened to kill the usurper (27:41). In her concern for Jacob's safety, she sent him from the frying pan into the fire, back to her family in Haran, where they would give him the education in the world's harsh realities that he would need in order to realize the dream of Jewish peoplehood.

Yet, running in fear might not have been the best way to reinforce Jacob's new-found, and tenuous, heroism. So, allowing him to consign her suggestion to the realm of motherly concern, she approached Isaac, telling him that Esau's Hittite wives had made her life miserable, and that she could not bear to have the same thing happen with Jacob (27:46). Isaac sent for Jacob, blessed him again, and instructed him to go to Laban's household, not in order to flee, but in order to find a wife. Though the initiator, Rebekah once again managed to allow her frail husband and son to feel that they were in control of their own destinies. Though manipulative, she had, indeed, acted brilliantly "for their own good." Even if, as some scholars think, there are two separate stories here of Jacob's departure,<sup>101</sup> the force of the final composite is clear: Jacob heard Rebekah, but he left in response to the instructions from his father (28:5).

Rebekah could not have known the magnitude of her sacrifice, could not have known that she would never see Jacob again. Yet, she must have had a sense of loss over cutting him loose and sending her beloved son out into the world, independent of her. The negative side of Jacob's leaving home is presented as a prophetic vision which Rebekah had that both of her sons would die on the same day: Jacob by Esau's hand, Esau as punishment for murdering his brother. To prevent this disaster, she sent Jacob away.<sup>102</sup> Though concerned for both of her sons, she sent Jacob to Haran to minimize the threat to both of them.<sup>103</sup>

Intimations of the magnitude of Rebekah's loss are also found in the midrash's close reading of the text. She told Jacob that he should stay with Laban only "a few days" (Gen. 27:44), until Esau's anger subsided. Yet, later, the seven years which Jacob labored for Rachel seemed to him like the same "few days" (29:20). The identical phrase is used in both places. Rebekah is going to be parted from Jacob for a few

100. See David E. Fass, "Jacob's Limp?", JUDAISM, no. 150, vol. 38:2 (Spring, 1989): 143-150, for an analysis of Jacob's ongoing maturational struggles.

101. See, e.g., Plaut, *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

102. B. Sota, 13a; Rashi *ad* Gen. 27:45.

103. TA, *ad* Gen. 28:5.

days that will really be years and years.<sup>104</sup> Actually, she never saw Jacob again.<sup>105</sup> He may have stayed away for as long as thirty-six years, until after she died.<sup>106</sup>

The way in which our sources depict Rebekah's death give us an indication of how tragically the end of her life was viewed. Her demise is only hinted at, a veiled reference inferred from the report of the death of Rebekah's nurse (Gen. 35:8), and God's appearance to Jacob — presumably to offer him the mourner's prayer of consolation. The secrecy with which Rebekah's death is treated was because Isaac was too sick, Jacob was away, and therefore, only the wicked Esau was available to see to her burial.<sup>107</sup> Rather than allow this to happen, the body was removed in the dark of night<sup>108</sup> and buried by the Hittites, since no one else was available.<sup>109</sup>

This, then, was the price that was paid by this remarkable woman. By cutting loose her son, by untying him from his proximity to her, she unbound him to seek his destiny and to become the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel. In doing so, she remained home alone with a sick husband who outlived her, and died alone and forlorn, her death unremarked.

"Rebekah the Unbinder" would be a good epitaph for her grave. She unbound herself from constraints of gender and family background, unbound Esau from his stranglehold on a Jewish future that she found anathema, unbound Isaac, at least in part, from his thrall to his own binding, his *Akedah*, and unbound Jacob from home and hearth in order to carry on Abraham's work. She paid a terrible price for her labors: loss, loneliness, and the sacrifice of her beloved son. A full appreciation of her courage and power is long overdue. It is time for us to help unbind Rebekah from being eclipsed by the men around her, so that we might stand in awe before her story. She is truly a worthy model for all men and women who labor on behalf of a dream.

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104. *Gen. Rab.* 67:10.

105. Ramban *ad* Gen. 35:8.

106. Munk *ad* Gen. 27:45.

107. *Tanhuma*, *Ki Teizei*, #4; *Gen. Rab.* 81:5; PRK 3:1; Rashi *ad* Gen. 35:8–9.

108. PR, 12:4.

109. Ramban *ad* Gen. 35:8.



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# ***Reluctant Partners: Juan Perón and the Jews of Argentina, 1946-1955***

ALLAN METZ

## *Introduction*

The purpose of this paper is to present the relationship between Juan and Eva Perón and the Jews during Perón's first term in office from 1946 to 1955,<sup>1</sup> and the balance sheet of how the Jewish community fared under this volatile leader and his equally, if not more, volatile wife. Space limitations do not permit a consideration of Perón's second ill-fated government (1973-1974) nor a study of his foreign policy toward Israel, as exemplified mainly by Argentina's United Nations position in 1947 and 1948. Before undertaking a study of Perón and the Jews from 1946 to 1955, consideration will be given to a brief history of the Jewish Argentine community and two powerful forces that it has had to contend with throughout this century — anti-Semitism and nationalism. This historical background will place the Peronist phenomenon, and its implications for the Jews, in perspective.

## *Historical Background: The Argentine Jewish Community, Anti-Semitism and Argentine Nationalism*

Approximately 2,200,000 immigrants established residence in Argentina between 1870 and 1910. In 1914, about 33% of the population was not of native birth. Mass European immigration supplied workers, which facilitated the rapid expansion of Argentina's infrastructure and export sector prior to World War I. In the process, society was also altered, resulting in the growth of the middle and working classes. Jewish immigration initially represented a very small number of the new arrivals. Following 1889, however, large numbers of Russian Jews reached Argen-

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1. Much has been written about Perón and the Perón period. See, for example, Robert J. Alexander, *The Perón Era* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1955, 1965); Robert J. Alexander, *Juan Domingo Perón: A History* (Boulder, Colo.: West Press, 1979); Robert D. Crassweller, *Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987); and Frederick C. Turner and José Enrique Miguens, eds., *Juan Perón and the Reshaping of Argentina*, Pitt Latin American series (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983).

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ALLAN METZ is Assistant Professor and Reference Librarian, Drury College, Springfield, Mo.

tine shores and they were the great majority of the 110,000 Jews in the country by 1914. By the mid-1930s, the Jewish population had grown to approximately 230,000, or 2% of the total population.<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding, it is essential to note an anti-Semitic event of central importance in the history of Argentine Jewry, the "tragic week,"<sup>3</sup> which encompassed both a general strike and a pogrom against the Jewish community. The middle class-based Radical Party and the upper classes feared that this general strike was being perpetrated by foreign anarchism and communism. Russian Jewish immigrants of Buenos Aires were suspected by the authorities to be a significant contributor to "maximalism," as communism was labelled at that time in Argentina, resulting in violence against Jews. The "tragic week" foreshadowed more systematic outbreaks of anti-Semitism, as occurred during the period from 1930 to 1945.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding Argentine nationalism, it may be traced through some of its most influential proponents: Ricardo Rojas, such erstwhile liberals as Paul Groussac and Alfredo Colmo, and Manuel Gálvez. The centenary of Argentina's independence (1910) marked the culmination of Argentine liberalism. Since 1910, struggles resulting from the social and labor demands of immigrant workers produced a hostile reaction on the part of the liberal ruling elite.<sup>5</sup> The latter, however, also recognized the necessity of granting social and political reforms to the newly emerging middle classes, which led to the presidential victory in 1916 of the Unión Cívica Radical (i.e., Radical Party) and its leader, Hipólito Yrigoyen. This triumph marked the first time that a popularly elected party gained political power in Argentina. Thus, the oligarchy not only had to deal with the demands of foreign immigrants, but also had begun to question the benefits acquired by the majority as a consequence of the opening up of the electoral process.<sup>6</sup>

Nationalists like Ricardo Rojas and Manuel Gálvez judged the Jews of Argentina within the context of a "nationalistic restoration."<sup>7</sup> Most liberals of that pivotal period viewed Jews with prejudice, indicative of a shift in liberal thought vis-à-vis the Jews in the form of questioning the wisdom of promoting immigration. The major newspapers, *La Nación* and *La Prensa*, also began a campaign against Jewish schools<sup>8</sup> under the pretext

2. Sandra McGee Deutsch, "The Argentine Right and the Jews, 1919-1933," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 18, no. 1 (May 1986): 114-115.

3. Daniel J. Elazar, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies: Argentina, Australia, and South Africa* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), p. 104.

4. Victor Mirelman, "The *Semana Trágica* of 1919 and the Jews in Argentina," *Jewish Social Studies* 37 (January 1975): 61-62.

5. Leonardo Senkman, "El nacionalismo y los judíos, 1909-1932," *Nueva Presencia*, 1 no. 3 (July 23, 1977): 6.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. See, for example, *La Prensa*, December 15, 1908, p. 9 and *La Nación*, June 19, 1914, p. 11.



of preserving the spiritual heritage of native Argentines from their “foreignizing” influence. Ricardo Rojas emerged as the self-appointed leader of that campaign,<sup>9</sup> whose basic premise was that the immigrant’s cultural identity conflicted with being Argentine.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of “double loyalty” was another indicator of the relationship between nationalism and the Jews of Argentina. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in favor of a national homeland for the Jews, won the enthusiastic support of Argentine Jewry, but also drew the attention of notable intellectual liberals to an inherent conflict: the Zionism of Argentines facing the pressures of assimilation. For example, Paul Groussac, an important Argentine-French intellectual and director of the National Library, took issue with what he termed “nationalistic” Zionism; he viewed it as being in conflict with Argentine nationalism, which should take precedence. In this sense, Groussac was one of the first liberals receptive to a very crucial aspect of anti-Zionist nationalism: intolerance of alleged Jewish double loyalty.<sup>11</sup>

This belief in the incompatibility between Zionism and Argentine nationalism gained credibility in the 1920s and became entrenched in succeeding years.<sup>12</sup> The question of suspect loyalty was also found in the views of another famous Argentine, Clemente Onelli, Director of the Zoological Garden, who protested against the “separatist particularism,” i.e., separate identity, of the Jews.<sup>13</sup> But Onelli’s concern went beyond that of the “particularism of the Jew, to the very condition of being a Hebrew.” He contended that Jews compromised Argentine ideals by hindering the integration of all races and nationalities within the nation’s borders. Thus, Onelli wished to test Jewish

national loyalty . . . via a standard not demanded of any other foreign immigrants: their assimilation, (or) . . . de-Judaization; that is, their integration into the country, stripped of their ancestral atavisms.<sup>14</sup>

Another nationalistic liberal, Alfredo Colmo,<sup>15</sup> stated that Jews were unwilling to assimilate, and constituted a potentially powerful and autonomous force, which represented an affront to the institutions, laws, and

9. Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6. See also Ricardo Rojas, *La restauración nacionalista: informe sobre educación* (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, 1909), esp. pp. 335–336 and 341.

10. Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

11. Paul Groussac, *Le sionisme et le prise de Jerusalem*, *Le Courier de La Plata*, December 30, 1917. For an analysis of Groussac’s remarks, see Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6 and Salomón Resnick, “Paul Groussac y el sionismo,” *Vida Nuestra*, 1 no. 7 (January 1918): 151–154.

12. Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

13. Clemente Onelli, “*El sionismo integral*,” *Vida Nuestra* 1 no. 12 (June 1918): 286–287. For rejoinders to Onelli, see León Kibrick, “*El Sr. Onelli y la cuestión judía*,” in this same issue, and Abraham Bublick, “*El Sr. Onelli y el sionismo*,” *Israel* no. 22 (1918): 458–459 and *Israel* no. 23 (1918): 478–482.

14. Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

15. Alfredo Colmo, “*Israel en América*,” *Vida Nuestra* 1 no. 12 (June 1918): 274–275.

practices of the countries in which they lived. Jews, he maintained, did not have the right to make their condition as foreigners supersede that of other Argentines. Rather, Colmo concluded, Jews born in Argentina were Argentine above anything else.<sup>16</sup>

While Groussac, Onelli, and Colmo voiced the concerns of liberal nationalists, Manuel Gálvez, an important conservative Argentine nationalist who later expressed his admiration for fascism, perhaps best exemplified the position of Argentine Hispano-Catholic nationalism vis-à-vis the Jews. His opposition to the Jewish immigration reflected a concern for the racial degeneration of *Hispanidad* (the essence of being Spanish). While Gálvez was willing to tolerate the presence of Jews already in Argentina, he was opposed to an increase of their number, since at issue was an immigration which compromised *Argentinidad* and its Latin spirit. This reflected the basis of the nationalists' ambivalent prejudice toward Jews, as expressed by Gálvez: in effect, the Jew was "a conspirator against nationalism . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Regarding Perón's relation to, and use of, Argentine nationalism,<sup>18</sup> he "amended right-wing nationalism, adding substance to rhetoric in a class and cultural appeal" to lower class native Argentines. For eight decades they had been ignored and looked down upon, but Perón told them that they were, in fact, the essence of being Argentine (i.e., of *Argentinidad*) and that he would be their benefactor.<sup>19</sup> Perón's 1946 electoral victory resulted from his adept exploitation of the discontents generated by the prior, infamous decade. The far right advocated nativism, which emphasized tradition and order in a reaction to modernity and political compromise. Nativism also had a strong anti-Semitic component. Perón combined and strengthened this nativism with appeals to populism and nationalism. Aside from a brief flirtation with anti-Semitism, when Perón was closer to the position of right wing nationalism (which he later disavowed), he was not a racist, nor did he ever deny Argentine immigrants a place in the country. The entrepreneurs of the 1930s did well economically during his first term in office. Perón enhanced his populist image by portraying the rich as enemies, and he utilized force and intimidation to make others conform to his will, including some of his own supporters.

16. Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

17. Gálvez's views are found in Manuel Gálvez, "Antisemitismo," *Criterio*, 5 no. 239 (September 29, 1932): 300–302, and Senkman, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

18. For further discussion of Perón's place within the larger context of Argentine nationalism see, among others, Juan José Hernández Arregui, *La formación de la conciencia nacional, 1930–1960*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hachea, 1970), pp. 393–435, and Marvin Goldwert, *Democracy, Militarism, and Nationalism in Argentina, 1930–1966: An Interpretation*, Latin American monographs, no. 25 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), pp. 75–139.

19. Bernard E. Segal, "Jews and the Argentine Center: A Middleman Minority," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America, Thematic Studies in Latin America*, Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx, eds. (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 206.

Perón “was a bully, a bully who suffered bigots, but he was not one of them.” In sum, Perónism was based “more on differences of income, status, and political allegiance than on race, ethnicity, or any combination of the two.”<sup>20</sup>

*Immediate Historical Background, 1943-1945*

Perón’s earlier political career provided little indication of his future accommodation with the Jewish community, or that he would differ substantially from other Argentine nationalists like Gálvez. His association with the previous military junta, as Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare and Vice President, did not seem to augur well for the Jews.<sup>21</sup> While Perón was not an ideological anti-Semite, his path to power, as part of this junta from 1943 to 1945, was closely linked to fascist ideology, and he greatly admired Benito Mussolini.<sup>22</sup> As labor minister, Perón was careful not to offend Jews in public speeches, but, at least quietly, he encouraged his followers in their anti-Jewish campaigns when he was still seeking political power, in late 1945. Appeals to anti-Semitism were made often and successfully for the purpose of attracting crowds to Peronist events.<sup>23</sup>

If Perón personally did not hold any anti-Semitic or right wing beliefs, the junta that he served, and which led him to power, was replete with those who did harbor such views. Among the most notorious of Perón’s fascist colleagues was Gustavo Martínez Zuviría, who was appointed Justice and Education Minister in October 1943. Under the pen name Hugo Wast, Martínez Zuviría was a popular writer who produced blatantly anti-Semitic works to enhance his readership. The most notorious of these was the two-part novel *El Kahal, Oro* (1935).<sup>24</sup> Martínez Zuviría also

20. Ibid, pp. 207 and 208. For more information on the infamous decade serving as a backdrop to Perón’s rise to power, see Mark Falcoff and Ronald H. Dolcart, eds., *Prologue to Perón: Argentina in Depression and War, 1930-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

21. For Jewish perceptions of Perón reflecting their initial skepticism of him prior to his assumption of power in June 1946, see, for example, Alfred Temkin, “Argentina: The Choice Before Perón,” *Commentary* vol. 1 no. 8 (June 1946): 14-21; Ray Josephs, “Argentina’s Jews Face Trouble,” *National Jewish Monthly* 60 no. 11 (July/August 1946): 396-397; Ray Josephs, “Don’t Cheer for Perón,” *National Jewish Monthly* vol. 61 no. 3 (November 1946): 88-89, 109; Sidney Hertzberg, “Argentina,” *Commentary* vol. 1 no. 3 (January 1946): 41; and Letter from Joseph M. Proskauer, President, American Jewish Committee, to James F. Byrnes, U.S. Secretary of State, November 28, 1945, File 835.4016/11-2845, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

22. Robert A. Potash, *The Army and Politics in Argentina, 1928-1945: Yrigoyen to Perón* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 211.

23. Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina From the Inquisition to Perón* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 227. See also Arnaldo Cortesi, “Peronistas Renew Anti-Jewish Moves: Police Look On as Mobs Storm Buenos Aires Streets — Fear Spreads in Community,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 1945, p. 8.

24. Hugo Wast, *El Kahal, Oro* (Buenos Aires: Editores de Hugo Wast, 1938). According to Dagobert D. Runes, *Kahal* was the title of a book by “Jewish renegade Jacob Brofman

demonstrated his authoritarian tendencies as Director of the National Library from 1931 to 1955, when he censored standard works that he viewed as too liberal for public consumption.<sup>25</sup> To the Jewish community's chagrin, Martínez Zuviría and his fascist colleagues carried out a campaign of harassment and repression. Laws targeted against Jews went into effect on August 19, 1943, including bans on kosher meat and Jewish publications. This anti-Semitic campaign attracted the attention of President Franklin Roosevelt, who expressed grave concern over the anti-Semitic and Nazi character of such actions.<sup>26</sup> While the military government of General Pedro Ramírez acceded to Roosevelt's wishes by lifting the ban on Jewish publishing, it still continued to display its anti-Jewish prejudices. For instance, the federal interventor in Entre Ríos, who implemented national laws in this province, stated that Jewish and Masonic benefit society charters would not be renewed.<sup>27</sup> Acts of violence against Jews complemented these attacks on Jewish culture. One journalist reported that Perón's police allowed hoodlums to paint on a sidewalk, "Kill a Jew and be a patriot!"<sup>28</sup> and the *New York Times* reported that

alarm and even terror are beginning to spread in the Jewish quarter because for some time all gatherings of Colonel Perón's followers have been a signal for some action against Jews.<sup>29</sup>

These fears were based on more than just rumors and hostile rallies.

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in Russia (1869)," which contained charges of Jewish conspiracies similar to those in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which was "another framed anti-Jewish plot deriving from a Russian publication." *Kahal* is also one of the terms for Jewish communal self-government, particularly in the Middle Ages and up to the eighteenth century. See Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Concise Dictionary of Judaism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 143, and David Bridger and Samuel Wolk, eds., *The New Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Behrman House, 1962), p. 260. See, also, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972, s.v. "Community". From these definitions, it may be seen how Wast misrepresented the governing function of this institution and was influenced by previous conspiratorial theories, especially those contained in the "Protocols." See also Wast, *Oro/Gold* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1939), which is an English version by Victor Rollins.

25. On Wast's anti-Semitism, see Allan Metz, "Hugo Wast: The Anti-Semitic Director of Argentina's National Library, 1931-1955," *Libraries & Culture* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 36-42 and Alfred Werner, "Streicher of Argentina," *Congress Weekly* vol. no. 10, no. 29 (October 29, 1943): 8-9.

26. Ray Josephs, *Argentine Diary* (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 190. See also by the same author, "Argentina: Land of (Broken) Promise," in the *National Jewish Monthly*, vol. 58 no. 8 (April 1944): 249-251 282-283, and "Perón Has Not Changed," *National Jewish Monthly*, vol. 63 no. 2 (October 1948): 46-47. This quotation also appeared in "Roosevelt Assails Argentine Ban on Jewish Press, and It is Lifted," *New York Times*, October 16, 1943, pp. 1, 5.

27. Arnaldo Cortesi, "Minorities Curbed Anew in Argentina," *New York Times*, October 24, 1943, p. 28, and George Blanksten, *Perón's Argentina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 226.

28. Edward Tomlinson, *Battle for the Hemisphere* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 122.

29. Arnaldo Cortesi, "Peronistas Renew Anti-Jewish Moves," *New York Times*, November 28, 1945, p. 8.

Synagogues throughout Argentina were periodically bombed, and Jews were often victims of anti-Semitic gangs. Invariably, those who carried out such crimes received tacit government approval and protection, combined with public indifference. As World War II drew to a close, Perón, ever adept in gauging the political wind, lessened his support of the Axis and reluctantly leaned more in the direction of the United States. In doing so, he was careful to demonstrate that he was not anti-Semitic, although he would not take steps to protect Jews from right wing gangs or the general discrimination that he had helped to foster. It was not until seven months after Germany's surrender that he publicly stated that participants in anti-Semitic demonstrations exceeded all democratic bounds and could not be a part of any Argentine political organization.<sup>30</sup>

Behind the scenes, fascist-leaning government officials were dismissed in a quiet but steady manner. Martínez Zuviría was dismissed as early as February 1944. As World War II ended, the Argentine government hastened to promote a democratic image. Government officials were quick to condemn anti-Semitic acts in a reflection of Perón's new liberal viewpoint. For example, General Felipe Urdapileta, the Interior Minister, stated in late 1945 that such acts were repudiated by the government, which viewed them as alien to the nation's sense of tolerance and justice.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Perón and the Jews, 1946-1955*

During Perón's rule, the Jewish community was a hesitant partner of the not so consistent Argentine leader. For example, while he spoke highly of the new state of Israel, he instructed the Argentine delegation to the United Nations to abstain on the U.N. vote for Israeli statehood. He claimed to sympathize with Jewish refugees of the Holocaust, yet restricted Jewish immigration.<sup>32</sup> He expressed admiration for the Jewish community and its official organizational representative, DAIA, or *Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas*, but, at the same time, he established a rival Peronist *kehillah* representative organization, *Organización Israelita Argentina* (OIA).<sup>33</sup> However, despite, these and other inconsistencies, the Jewish community decided early on that it was best to "play ball" with, rather than oppose, the powerful Argentine leader.<sup>34</sup>

30. "Perón Assails Riots; Denies Responsibility," *New York Times*, December 12, 1945, p. 13. For more about the meeting itself, see Arnaldo Cortesi, "Perón Thugs Kill 4 in Argentine Rally," *New York Times*, December 9, 1945, pp. 1, 22.

31. *Buenos Aires Herald*, November 2, 1945.

32. For more on Perón's Jewish immigration policy, see Haim Avni, *Argentina y la historia de la inmigración judía, 1810-1950* (Jerusalem: Editorial Universitaria Magnes; Buenos Aires: AMIA, Comunidad de Buenos Aires, 1983), pp. 496-504.

33. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, pp. 228-229.

34. Mann to Hoyt, "Jewish Delegation Visits President Perón" (Reference to Buenos Aires Despatch 2052, March 14, 1947, File 835.4016/3-1947), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Perón's rhetoric constituted a vital component of his political style,<sup>35</sup> and he displayed a dynamism and charisma which symbolized national pride. Thus, his pro-Jewish rhetoric and willingness to accept the Jewish community as a significant component of Argentine society helped calm latent Argentine anti-Semitism. For example, he greeted the Jews of Argentina in September 1946, on the occasion of the Jewish New Year:

The Argentine Nation has always respected all creeds and ideals because, being a civilized country, her Constitution and her line of conduct are based on this principle.

Therefore, as President of the Argentine people, I neither can nor wish to tolerate any sort of discrimination. I judge all citizens of this country not by their thoughts, but by their actions.

As for myself, I have given proof — not only by word but by deed — that my judgment is not prejudiced. For the sake of humanity, I wish that all nations and leaders might act with equal tolerance . . .

Therefore, the President of Argentina shares in the celebration of the Jewish New Year holidays with the same sentiment as he shares the joys and sorrows of each Argentine citizen. And so, I take this opportunity to convey, through the President of . . . [DAIA], my greetings to all Jewish citizens.<sup>36</sup>

These elevated words were negated, however, by his sometimes condescending attitude toward Jews collectively. Perhaps he even fancied himself as a European prince defending the Jews under his charge. In a July 5, 1951 speech, Perón praised Jewish humility:

When a Jew comes to ask that his rights be respected, he does this humbly, without arrogance and without pressing that he have justice. This demonstration is for me . . . the greatest quality that a man can have who claims his rights.<sup>37</sup>

The Peronist leader's position on the question of Jewish rights, however, was often clearly hypocritical, particularly regarding anti-Semitic activities. For example, a wave of anti-Semitic publications caused Jewish protest in May 1950. When the distribution of these publications continued unabated, DAIA directly appealed to Perón, who offered only a bland, noncommittal response.

Fortunately, the periodicals mentioned in your above-cited letter in no way represent the national sentiment, despite the fact that they enjoy the unconditional benefits that stem from freedom of the press, which the laws of our country assure everyone.<sup>38</sup>

Perón, however, was hardly a champion of freedom of expression and of

35. See Juan Perón, *Expone ante las organizaciones Israelitas las realidades del justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: *Presidencia de la Nación*, 1951), *Perón y el pueblo judío* (Buenos Aires: DAIA, 1974), and Perón, *Pensamiento del Presidente Perón sobre el pueblo judío* (Buenos Aires: DAIA, 1954).

36. Juan Perón to Moises Goldman, September 26, 1946, Z5, File 11160, Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

37. Perón, *El pensamiento del Presidente Perón sobre el pueblo judío*, p. 29.

38. DAIA memorandum, August 28, 1950, to President Perón; Juan Duarte (Perón's private secretary) to DAIA, September 8, 1950.

the press, for he was zealous in his attempts to replace publications critical of his regime with state-controlled ones. But his insincere and evasive answer foreclosed any further discussion. This indifferent attitude resulted in widespread distribution of anti-Jewish material throughout the Perón presidency.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, Perón's call for restraint on the part of his more rabid nationalist anti-Semitic followers<sup>40</sup> was largely due to pragmatic rather than moral considerations. In taped memoirs, he recorded his reply to a German who, having fled to Argentina following World War II, exhorted Perón to take care of the Jewish question. Perón reasoned that if Hitler could not solve the Jewish problem with 100 million Germans, then how could he do anything with only 20 million Argentines. Furthermore, Perón noted that it was impossible to kill or deport the Jews. Thus, he concluded, the best manner in which to deal with Jews was to integrate them as much as possible into Argentine society.<sup>41</sup> This reflected Peronist opposition to anti-Semitic nationalists who opposed Jewish integration into Argentine society. Thus, Peronism advocated assimilation for the Jews of Argentina. This policy resulted in no attacks on the Jewish community during Perón's first administration.<sup>42</sup> But while some Jews did assimilate, the Jewish community as a whole managed to maintain its identity despite these Peronist pressures.

Besides the fact that Perón did not share Nazi racial beliefs, his response to the Jewish problem (i.e., assimilation) also marked another distinction between his regime and one attempting to impose a truly Nazi-fascistic government in Argentina. This reflected his inherent dislike of violence as a major component in the achievement of his political ends. While he frequently would look the other way when violence was committed by others on his behalf, and would occasionally resort to inflammatory speeches, he never was inclined to make violence itself a major feature of his political philosophy, as Mussolini or Hitler did.<sup>43</sup>

Perón's position regarding the issue of Jewish immigration after World War II was not wholly favorable, but it was an improvement over Argentina's prior policies. His boasts of empathy and assistance for Jewish refugees were essentially overblown rhetoric and, in spite of his promises of government understanding, DAIA had to continue to petition the Argentine government, even following Perón's demise in 1955, by calling

39. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, pp. 229–231.

40. Cabot to Secretary of State, File 835.00/12-445, December 4, 1945, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

41. Torcuato Luca de Tena, Luis Calvo, and Esteban Peicovich, eds., *Yo, Juan Domingo Perón: relato autobiográfico* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1976), pp. 88, 90.

42. Judith Laikin Elkin, "Antisemitism in Argentina: The Jewish Response," in *Living With Antisemitism: Modern Responses*, ed. Jejuda Reinharz, The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series, 6 (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987), p. 341.

43. Joseph A. Page, *Perón: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 90.



for the removal of artificial barriers to immigration and a general amnesty, for illegal immigrants.<sup>44</sup>

Tactfully, DAIA did not point to Perón's willingness to allow Germans, a number of whom were war criminals, into Argentina following World War II. His position on the matter of immigration was neither pro-German nor anti-Jewish, but merely cynical and pragmatic. Jewish refugees, who were poor, could not offer the large bribes that the Germans did to influence Perón's decisions. Furthermore, he discovered that restrictions on immigration allowed him to manipulate the Jewish community, and thus he was hesitant to relinquish this leverage.<sup>45</sup>

In the early days of his regime, the immigration of agricultural and technical workers from Southern Europe, Ireland, Belgium, and The Netherlands, was favored, rather than the thousands of displaced Jews then seeking refuge.<sup>46</sup> Until mid-1947, only a few hundred Jews arrived in Argentina. Thereafter, a more favorable policy emerged, with the dismissal of the Immigration Director, who had a well-documented fascist and anti-Semitic history.<sup>47</sup> According to Haim Avni, a total of 4,000 Jewish immigrants arrived from 1946 to 1949 with Peron in power, relative to a total population of about 16 million.<sup>48</sup> From 1933 to 1947, neither the United States, Australia, Canada, nor other countries with a prior history of admitting immigrants, opened their doors to Jewish immigrants. After the war, their record with respect to Jewish immigration improved slightly. Perón's record, from 1946 to 1949, relative to total population, was less favorable to Jewish D.P.s than that of Australia and Canada, but was as favorable as that of the United States. According to Mark Wischnitzer, an authority on Jewish immigration, 54,000 Jews came to the United States from the end of World War II to 1948, relative to a total population of about 150 million. This compares to Australia, which, in a similar period, admitted 6,000 Jews relative to a population of about 7.4 million, and Canada, which admitted 7,500 Jews relative to a total population of about 12.6 million.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, as alluded to earlier, Perón sought direct control and leverage over the Jewish community by forming the rival Jewish communal organization, *Organización Israelita Argentina* (OIA). Led by the Perón loyalist, Pablo Manguel, the OIA automatically lent its full approval to Perón, from its first communication in 1947 until Perón's fall from power in

44. José Ventura (president of DAIA) to D. Laureano Landaburu (Minister of the Interior), October 16, 1956.

45. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, pp. 231–232.

46. *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 48, 1946–7, p. 248.

47. Santiago M. Peralta, *La acción del pueblo judío en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1943); *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 49, 1947–8, p. 269; Haim Avni, *Op. cit.*, p. 504.

48. Avni, *Op. cit.*, p. 517.

49. Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety: The Story of Jewish Migration Since 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948), p. 268; Avni, *Op. cit.*, p. 514.

1955.<sup>50</sup> For his part, Perón attempted to enhance the OIA's prestige by directing all of his goodwill messages to the Jewish community through it. He always made a point of emphasizing that the OIA was the one Jewish organization struggling for democracy and the rights of minorities. Regarding his revision of the Argentine Constitution, Perón in 1949 pointed to Article 26, which barred racial discrimination in Argentina, and credited that article to the efforts of the OIA.<sup>51</sup>

Perón's dual manipulation of the Jewish community, via immigration limitations and the puppet organization, OIA, coalesced when he gave the OIA authority to select Jews for citizenship and reject those who were not eligible. Proper immigration documents, obtained through the OIA, were even required for applicants who had close relatives in the country. This patronage award to the Peronist Jewish organization hindered Jewish immigration because Jews were the only ones who required the approval of two authorities, the government and the OIA.<sup>52</sup>

The Jewish community's complicated relations with the Perón regime had an additional factor to contend with, the mercurial Eva María Duarte de Perón, Perón's wife.<sup>53</sup> Evita was a dominating presence in both the Perón government and in the country as a whole, an almost unheard of occurrence in a male-oriented society. Her insatiable quest and will for power even surpassed that of Perón, and greatly facilitated his rise to, and retention of, power. Evita's was "the iron character around which Perón wrapped his flexible ambitions," resulting in a formidable political partnership.

The Jewish community, thus, also had to deal with Evita. She moralized politics by continually condemning the rich and other alleged foes of the working class. In addition, she personalized politics by the use of extra-legal measures to intimidate enemies. Her tendencies toward both democracy and demagoguery were so powerful that perhaps even she could not distinguish between the two. Both of these characteristics were clearly present in her behavior toward the Jews of Argentina.

Always aware of the political worth of public posturing, Eva became more famous than her husband for her passionate speeches in the cause of all deprived Argentines. She made eloquent and sincere appeals for equal rights, frequently before specially selected Jewish audiences. However, her positions toward the Jewish community were so capricious and frequently irresponsible as to negate her attempts to appear benevolent.

50. More about the *Organización Israelita Argentina's* formation and its initial pledge of loyalty to Argentina and support for Perón may be found in *Mundo Israelita*, "Manifiesto: por que estamos con el gobierno," May 1, 1947.

51. *Mundo Israelita*, March 19, 1949.

52. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, p. 232.

53. For more on Evita's life, see Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Eva Perón* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980) and J.M. Taylor, *Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

Her vendetta against the Jewish Groisman family in 1950-2 vividly demonstrated the dark side of Eva, and epitomized the tenuous situation of Argentine Jews vis-à-vis the Peróns. The impetus for the Groisman incident was Evita's regular use of extortion for business contributions to the Eva María Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation, which was both funded and managed by the government. As Evita was quick to point out, the foundation promoted the construction of schools, hospitals, and low cost hotels. However, there were rumors that foundation funds were also used to further Perón's political and economic interests.<sup>54</sup> A number of businessmen made large contributions to the foundation, due more to practical than idealistic considerations. The Groismans, owners of the famous Buenos Aires Mu-Mu candy factory, unfortunately, did not perceive this nuance.

A long-simmering conflict between the Groisman family and Evita reached its height when the foundation ordered approximately \$10,000 worth of candy destined to poor children during the Christmas season, in her name. The Groismans filled the order and forwarded a bill, which enraged Evita, who was seeking simple political extortion. The Groisman family then pressed for payment, which proved to be both a momentous and totally disastrous decision.

Evita already disliked the Groismans because one of the brothers, a family business lawyer, was a well-known opposition socialist leader. It is unclear whether the billing for the candy order incurred Evita's final wrath or merely served as an excuse to lash out at the political opposition. What is certain, however, was her vindictive campaign against this family and their company. Official "inspectors" quickly visited the factory, publicly announcing that it was infested with rodents. They further claimed that the candy was poisonous, an outrageous charge worthy of the most fervent anti-Semite. In short order, the factory was shut down, the owners evicted, and their 700 employees thrown out of work. The Groismans were ruined financially, and the Jewish community was anguished over these developments due to Evita's great popularity with the Argentine masses, who would be inclined to believe what she said. Her shrill claim that this Jewish family was literally poisoning the nation was the material of which pogroms are fashioned.

The Groismans pressed Jewish community leaders to defend them in this matter, but these officials were most reluctant to take issue directly with the Peróns. While DAIA did offer considerable funds for a legal defense, no lawyers were willing to jeopardize their careers, for fear of Peronist retribution. The Groisman family, however, would not back down. Following unsuccessful appeals to a number of community leaders, they went to Rabbi Amram Blum, who was acquainted with Perón. Rabbi Blum was the ideal intermediary, assuring the Groismans of his determination

54. For details of the foundation and its corruption, see Blanksten, pp. 102-109.

to broach the matter with Perón. Initially, Blum visited with community leaders, but his plan was quickly rejected, though he made the case that they should not remain indifferent to the Groisman's fate, since a similar one could await them. These leaders, however, wanted to avoid a confrontation with Perón and warned that if Blum followed through on his plan to see the Argentine president, he should in no way make any claims to speak for any other community official or institution. Guillermo Schlesinger, the community's senior rabbi, was more direct, suggesting that Blum, new to the country, should keep out of political matters altogether. This should not imply that the Jewish communal establishment was callously indifferent to this situation, which was extremely complicated and perilous. However, if the Jewish leadership had confronted Perón and labelled Eva's accusations as false, this might have incurred Perón's wrath, which could have been directed against other segments of the Jewish community and had the potential for provoking state repression and anti-Semitic riots. At the very least, the Jewish establishment might reasonably have had such concerns, which would necessarily have overshadowed the plight of one Jewish family (i.e. the Groismans'), considering that the safety of the whole community could have been jeopardized. In the opinion of several community leaders, Blum was idealistic but shortsighted in his courageous attempt to restore a family's business, which could have had dangerous consequences for the Jews had Perón been offended by such an overture.

Blum, nevertheless, arranged a meeting with Perón, which took place during the intermediate days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the long interim, over one year, between the closing of the factory and this meeting, two important events had occurred which affected the situation; most significant was Eva Perón's premature death due to cancer in July 1952, which definitely made Blum's task easier. At the same time, however, the longer the factory remained dormant, the more difficult it became to reopen it. In addition, several of Perón's advisors were inclined not to restart the business. Thus, Blum still had to overcome substantial obstacles.

The meeting began on a positive note, with Perón warmly greeting the rabbi. In the course of the conversation, Perón was impressed by Blum's courage in bringing up this sensitive issue. Blum explained that the whole Jewish community was concerned and insecure about the negative implications of the Groisman episode, and that Perón's favorable intervention in the matter would greatly reassure them. As a token gesture, Perón summoned the Minister of Commerce, who was a suspect anti-Semite. The latter argued that a reopening of the plant would take several months, and that the long layoff of its employees would complicate their repayment for time lost from work. It appeared that Blum had lost his case, for Perón seemed to go along with the minister's opinion. As the meeting was drawing to a close, however, Blum indicated to Perón that

Yom Kippur was approaching. He explained to the Argentine president that God forgives all for the sins of the past year on that day and, in a similar fashion, the rabbi then appealed to Perón to forgive the Groisman family and bring this positive New Year's message to the Jewish community.

This risky but brilliant strategy proved to be successful. Perón was taken in by this praise and the drama of granting a large favor to the Jews at the time of this most holy of days. It may be speculated that Perón was sincerely touched by Blum's eloquent appeal or perhaps he thought that, by agreeing with him, he could enhance his popularity with, and influence over, the Jews. Regardless of the president's motives, the outcome marked a victory for the courageous rabbi and the beleaguered family. Just prior to Yom Kippur, Perón and Blum jointly announced on the radio the reopening of the Groisman candy factory.

The Groisman incident reflected Peronist treatment of the Jews. Though not overtly anti-Semitic, Juan and Eva Perón nonetheless frequently endangered the individual and collective interests of Jews through their capricious actions. Simultaneously, however, they kept open the channels of communication with the Jewish community and were always willing to entertain their requests. It seemed as though the only consistent element in Perón's stance toward the Jews was his willingness to listen to anyone who would most satisfy his self-interest.<sup>55</sup>

In the final analysis, however, Perón's opportunism vis-à-vis the Jewish community was in no way totally negative. Notwithstanding his frequently shallow rhetoric and inconsistent positions, the number of precedents established by him in the area of Jewish rights was quite impressive. He overturned established Argentine tradition by appointing Jews to significant government posts, like Pablo Manguel as Argentina's first Ambassador to Israel, Liberto Rabovitsch to federal judge, and Abraham Krislavin as sub-secretary to the Minister of the Interior. Jews also held important positions in the Peronist party structure. Most notable among these officials was congressional deputy José Alexenicer, who held a leadership position in the important interior city of Córdoba. The army, a stronghold of anti-Semitism, also was affected by Perón's public commitment to eliminating discrimination in Argentina. For example, he insisted that the army grant official leave to all Jewish soldiers during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Perón's dictatorial tendencies, abhorrent as they may have been, were not really linked to anti-Semitism. For instance, his suppression of opposition newspapers did not specifically target Jews or blame them for his actions, despite the considerable presence of Jewish journalists in the press, who could have been used as targets had Perón chosen to. A clear case in point was Perón's nationalization of Argentina's major daily news-

55. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, pp. 232-237.

paper, *La Prensa*, in retaliation for its highly critical attitude toward his regime. He later reopened the newspaper after installing Peronist unionists. The Perón administration selected César Tiempo, a great twentieth century Argentine Jewish writer and playwright, as editor of *La Prensa*'s famous literary supplement. To his credit, Perón did not attempt to justify his campaign against the newspaper by invoking images of a Jewish conspiracy which controlled the media.<sup>56</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The election of Juan Domingo Perón as president of Argentina in 1946, largely due to his appeals to the working class and Argentine nationalism, marked a new era for that nation. The first meaningful changes in the country's social structure took place in his regime. His populism included the notion of an industrialized nation consisting of a multiple class alliance. Through this alliance, continued economic growth would ease inevitable social conflict, thereby substantially altering the direction of Argentine society.<sup>57</sup>

The Perón period had a great and mostly positive impact on the Jews of Argentina. Thus, in spite of continued anti-Semitic activities by proponents of right wing nationalism, in 1949 the American Jewish Committee concluded that, generally, there was little for the Argentine Jews to complain about.<sup>58</sup> Perón's pro-Jewish stance, questionable just prior to his assumption of power in 1945, had become a significant component of his policies. Following 1948, relations between Perón and the Jews were reasonably cordial.

Anti-Semites and ultra-nationalists were not part of mainstream Argentine politics, and were largely held in check under Perón.<sup>59</sup> During the Peronist era in general there was a decrease in anti-Semitism.<sup>60</sup> Despite restrictions on Jewish immigration, and tolerance for Nazis escaping Europe, Perón himself was not anti-Semitic. He liberalized prior Argentine immigration policies toward Jews, and his positive record in that regard is as good as that of the United States, through not as good as other democracies, such as Australia and Canada, with a prior history of admit-

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 237–238.

57. Eugene F. Sofer, *From Pale to Pampa: A Social History of the Jews of Buenos Aires* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), p. 125.

58. M. Senderey, "South America: Political Situation, Argentina," in *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 50, 1948–1949, p. 269.

59. For the contemporary Jewish reaction to Perón's downfall in 1955, see, for example, Jean Jaffe, "Change in Argentina?" *Jewish Frontier* (July 1955): 16–18; Jean Jaffe, "Argentine Jewry under Perón," *Congress Weekly*, Vol. 22 no. 26 (October 10, 1955): 5–6; and "Argentina," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 57, 1956, pp. 520–521, 637.

60. Meyer Weinberg, *Because They Were Jews: A History of Antisemitism*, Contributions to the Study of World History, no. 4 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 11–12.

ting immigrants. His economic policies benefited Jews, who experienced greater economic mobility and opportunity than ever before.<sup>61</sup>

This was the case as long as Perón remained in power. The military and segments of the upper class, however, helped to overthrow him in September, 1955. Together with the Church, both had been major proponents of anti-Semitism in the past. With Perón out of the way to restrain them, they enjoyed a political resurgence, which resulted in a new wave of anti-Semitism.<sup>62</sup> With a few brief respites, this initiated a spiraling anti-Semitic trend, extending from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s, when Raúl Alfonsín was democratically elected president in 1983.

With the exception of the Groisman incident, the Jews under Perón's "benign neutrality" were relatively prosperous and secure. By the time of Perón's ouster he had compiled, in many respects, an admirable record. However, some have noted perceptively that, in spite of this record, Argentine Jewish liberals still portray Peronism as anti-Semitic, even with all of the benefits that the regime brought to them.<sup>63</sup> It required many years before such Jews were willing to disassociate Perón from his anti-Semitic supporters, and they never did so completely. During his regime, the Jewish community was in a state of intimidation, since there was always the chance that Perón could turn against it, although he never did.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, most Jews resented the Argentine leader, more due to his dictatorial methods than his opinions toward them. Former Russian and German Jews who fled to Argentina were all too aware of the perils of being under a dictator, however momentarily benevolent he might be.<sup>65</sup>

Argentine Jews generally remember the Perón period as one of reckless government and as a tragic time in the nation's history. Some believed that he made too many concessions to the masses to win their support, and did not govern or manage the economy well. Jews considered themselves fortunate, but not because they believed that Perón protected them. Rather, according to an anonymous Jewish businessman, Jews were lucky *despite* Perón, for the atmosphere was ripe for a pogrom, though none ever materialized. Somehow, they failed to detect any influence of Perón in this circumstance, despite the dictatorial power these same Jews ascribed to him. Jewish intellectuals also were concerned regarding Perón, who harmed higher education with his "reforms" and repression of the universities, because Jews were represented in proportionately higher

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

63. Juan José Sebreli, *La cuestión judía en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1968), p. 239.

64. Robert Weisbrot, "Anti-Semitism in Argentina," *Midstream* 24 (May 1978): 13.

65. For a case in point, see Allan Metz, "Why Sosua? Rafael Trujillo's Motives for Jewish Refugee Settlement in the Dominican Republic," *Contemporary Jewry* 11, no. 1 (1990): 3–28.



numbers, and were, thus, likely to be disproportionately affected by his interference.

Not all Jews, however, hold negative views. Some concede that small businessmen profited from Perón's general promotion of industrial and commercial activities. Young Jews saw more employment opportunities open up in previously restricted areas, such as civil service. Economic prosperity under him afforded a majority of Jews upward mobility from the working class to the middle class.<sup>66</sup> Most of all, Jewish community leaders pointed out that if they humored him, then he generally would respond in a benevolent manner.

While Perón was not totally successful in portraying himself as a friend of the Jewish community, he acted more favorably to the Jews than did the preceding military rulers during the period 1930 to 1945. And it was ironic that Perón's long series of successors, both civilian and military, were either less inclined or less able to control outbreaks of anti-Semitism than was Perón in his first term in office. Considering the fact that Jews in Argentina have been constantly vulnerable, they were fortunate that Perón's particular style of demagoguery prompted him to try to be popular with all groups, as opposed to looking for scapegoats. While not ignoring his authoritarian tendencies and his expediency in governance, Perón did make an effort to integrate Jews into Argentine society on an equal basis. Despite all of his deficiencies, he still developed into a head of state who was among the most benevolent towards the Jews in Argentina's modern history.<sup>67</sup>

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66. Elkin, p. 335.

67. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, pp. 238–240.

# Asser Levy

MAURITS PRINS

THIS YEAR IS THE 338TH ANNIVERSARY OF the arrival of the first Jews in North America; in early September, 1654, a small party of twenty-three Jewish refugees from Recife, Northern Brazil, landed in Manhattan. In January of that year they had left South America in a small fleet of sixteen ships to return to Holland after the Portuguese had reconquered their former colony in northern Brazil, seized by the Dutch a quarter of a century previously. On their way to the other side of the ocean, pirates had attacked one of the ships, the passengers being taken prisoner and robbed of their belongings. It must have been providential that a French privateer, the *St. Charles*, bound for the Hudson Bay, had been able to rescue them and put them ashore at the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, where they thus had arrived through force of circumstances. The party consisted of mainly Sephardic Jews, with one Ashkenazi amongst them, a burgher of Amsterdam, Asser Levy van Swellem, who has gone down in American history as merely Asser Levy. Much has been written about this pioneer and Founding Father of American Jewry, but some further details of his life and background are mentioned in the unpublished chronicles and genealogy of my own family, since Asser Levy van Swellen is one of my ancestors.

It appears that the whole family originates from the town of Schwelm in Westphalia (Germany), from where two brothers, Elchanan and Jacob, moved to Frankfurt on Main in the year 1530. As was the custom in those days, Elchanan adopted the name of the town he came from, "Schwelm," as his surname. His brother, Jacob, being an itinerant printer of Hebrew by trade, left Frankfurt for Italy where his two sons, Asscher and Meir, set up a press in the town of Parenzo, near Venice, and became well known in the middle of the sixteenth century as printers of Hebrew works. Their printer's mark showed a Menorah with the name "Parenzo" in Hebrew, which could equally be pronounced as "Prins," and this became henceforth the surname of this branch of the family. Meir's grandson, Isaac Prins (b. 1620), settled in Holland in the year 1640, this writer being his seventh generation direct descendant.

Elchanan Schwelm's grandson, Löb (d. 1632), had a son, named Asscher, born in Frankfurt on Main, who also moved to Amsterdam in his early youth, where he "Dutchified" his name from Asscher Ben

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MAURITS PRINS was a historian and writer with a particular specialty in the lives of his ancestors, who included Asser Levy and Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Löb (= Levy) Schwelm to Asser Levy van Swellem. His family in Frankfurt were well-to-do merchants at the time, and Asser did equally well in Amsterdam — so much so, that he was soon able to purchase the so-called *Poortersbrief* which made him a registered burgher of the city.

The early seventeenth century was the period of the young Dutch Republic's Golden Age, and Amsterdam was perhaps the most important trading center in the world. It could thus be expected that from Amsterdam the recently established Portuguese Sephardic Community would strengthen business ties with their kinsmen in the colony in Brazil, which the Dutch had conquered from the Portuguese in 1625, and in which many Marrano families settled after the forced mass conversion of Jews in Portugal in 1497. Quite a number of them became owners of prosperous sugar plantations, while others became exporters of Brazilian timber.

Due to the tolerant Dutch attitude towards freedom of worship, the greater part of the settled Marrano families chose to revert to an open Jewish life-style and, assisted by the Amsterdam Sephardic Congregation, established their Congregation in the newly acquired Dutch colony, the *Kahal Kadosh* (Holy Congregation) *Zur Yisroel* in Recife, where a synagogue was already in use by the year 1636. It immediately became a thriving community, able to attract a spiritual leader in the person of the famous Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca from Amsterdam. He became their "*Hakham*" (Sephardic Rabbi) in the year 1642, and is thus considered to be the first officiating Rabbi in the Americas.

The close links between the Jewish community of Recife with its Amsterdam counterpart induced a number of Jews from the latter city to expand their trading interests to the new Dutch colony by taking up residence there. Asser Levy was one of them, probably travelling in the same ship as the newly appointed Rabbi.

The Portuguese, intent to retake possession of the lost colony, had meanwhile received some military re-inforcements from the mother country in Europe, which enabled them to start a series of counter-attacks on Recife and even to besiege the town. Living conditions in the colony worsened, and the situation deteriorated to such an extent that the local Dutch authorities called for a military civil defence force, which included a separate unit entirely composed of Jews, who were exempted from guard duties on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. It was this unit that excelled in a fierce battle against the Portuguese in 1646. The enemy's attack was repelled — not, however, without having inflicted severe casualties among the Jewish defenders of the town.

When reports of this heroic battle reached Holland, the Dutch authorities instructed the Governor at Recife to express their sincere thanks to all Jews of the territory for the bravery and assistance shown in the defence of Dutch interests, adding that the Governor "look after them and see to it that under no circumstances should henceforth any

differentiation be made between them and the other residents of the colony." It is this letter of thanks that makes some Dutch historians claim that the heroic behavior of the Jewish military unit in the defence of the Dutch colony ensured for evermore the equal status of Jews in the Netherlands and territories.

Once arrived in New Amsterdam, Asser Levy and his party soon discovered that the local Dutch official attitude towards Jews was completely different from what they had experienced in the former Dutch Brazilian colony. The Governor of the territory, Peter Stuyvesant, a difficult and dictatorial person who looked askance at anybody who was not a Calvinist, particularly Jews and Lutherans, rejected the refugees' petition to stay in the young American colony.

Asser Levy must have been well aware of the fact that this refusal did not agree with the official Dutch attitude as expressed in the aforesaid letter of thanks, the contents of which had been widely publicized among Jewry in the Brazilian colony. He thus did not lose any time in referring the matter to the Sephardic Congregation of Amsterdam with a request to intervene.

Shortly thereafter, in January, 1655, the Directors of the Dutch West India Company (W.I.C.) received a petition from "the Jewish Nation of Amsterdam," humbly requesting them to grant the right of permanent settlement to all Jews entering the new American colony. With a few words in the margin of this request, the W.I.C. laid the foundation of the first Jewish community in New Amsterdam.

Permission is granted that they can live and trade in the territory provided they do not become a charge to the Dutch Church or the W.I. Company.

In their letter to Peter Stuyvesant, the Directors of the W.I.C. censured his negative attitude, admitting, however, that they were not overfond of Jews either, but since they had invested in the Company and, moreover, had taken a prominent part in the defence of the colony in Brazil, it would be unfair not to admit them into another Dutch colony.

During the course of the same year a trade-war broke out between the Dutch Republic and Sweden, whereupon Peter Stuyvesant received instructions to remove a Swedish settlement from the Delaware River (where Newcastle now stands). For this purpose, an army was needed. A local conscription list was duly drawn up, which excluded Jews on the ground that they were barred from carrying arms. Nevertheless, those exempted from military duties would be made liable to the payment of a special monthly tax. Asser Levy and his friends refused to pay this on the ground that they had offered their services in good faith, since they had performed these same duties in the former Dutch Brazilian colony. They thus formally requested the local authorities to

be allowed to perform guard duties and have the special tax abolished. This request was turned down with the remark that unless they would abide by the existing laws they would have to leave the territory. It was Levy who again appealed directly to the Headquarters of the W.I.C. in Amsterdam to have this latest decision reversed. To the chagrin of Stuyvesant, Levy's appeal was allowed and the Governor was again reprimanded. Nevertheless, the battle against discrimination was by no means over.

Sometime in the year 1656, Asser Levy, keen businessman that he was, wished to extend his activities to the Port Oranje (Albany) region, but Stuyvesant banned Jews from having business dealings in that part of the colony. Quite unperturbed and confident, Levy once more asked Holland to intervene. The outcome was that the ruling was declared invalid. This decision enabled Levy to proceed with his business development in the district, where he became the first authorized butcher in Albany.

In March, 1657, a local court ruled that only full burghers of the Colony could become entitled to certain specific trade privileges. Since Jews were not considered to belong to that category, Levy immediately produced his original Amsterdam-issued *Poortersbrief* showing him to be a registered burgher of Amsterdam, simultaneously mentioning that he had done his military service in common with the other local burghers of the colony. His protests were of no avail, and the court persisted in its refusal to grant these trade privileges to any Jews. This time he did not refer the matter to Holland, but, the day following the refusal, he remonstrated directly with the Governor, demanding that the court's ruling be set aside.

With the various reprimands perhaps still rankling in his mind, Peter Stuyvesant gave in, at last. Only a few days later, on the 21st of April, 1657, the memorable Decree was published that entitled Jews in the New Netherlands to become eligible for full citizenship in the colony. The clashes between the forceful Asser Levy and the antagonistic Peter Stuyvesant had come to an end at last. Jews had obtained equal status in the young American colony, auguring well for the happiness of American Jewry of the future.

Stuyvesant had become a disillusioned man. He was well aware that he was unpopular with this superiors in Holland, due to his pomposity and dictatorial attitude. Though he had proved to be a most able civil servant, the W.I.C. Board had been at loggerheads with him on numerous occasions in the past. It must be admitted, however, that Stuyvesant ably managed and promoted the extension of the acquired North American territory, which he governed until it had to be ceded to the British in the year 1664, when he was recalled to Holland. He retired there for a short while, but returned to New Amsterdam (meanwhile renamed New York) in a private capacity to spend his last years on

his farm (Dutch: "Bouwery"), situated on the lower tip of Manhattan, where he died in 1672. He was buried beneath the chapel on his farm, nowadays the site of St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie Church.

Meanwhile, Asser Levy, now a full citizen of the colony, had been able to extend his various business interests without further interference. The records of the Dutch Archives in the Netherlands show him as a buyer of real estate in Albany in 1661, also becoming the first Jewish landowner in New Amsterdam, soon to be renamed New York. His many transactions in that city commenced with the purchase of land in June, 1662, when he bought some plots in the Zuid Willemstraat (South William Street), followed in 1678 by the building of an abattoir on a site where Wall Street now stands. He also became the owner of a then well known inn in the district. Within a period of ten years from his arrival he had managed to become one of the most prosperous businessmen in the colony. When the local Council required funds towards the erection of defence-works against the British, Levy was the only Jew who responded, with a contribution of one hundred guilders. The records of the year 1671 show him also lending money towards the building of the first Lutheran church in New York.

An accurate picture of Asser Levy's mentality and character may be drawn from the study of the large number of lawsuits that he was involved in. His name appears in numerous suits as the plaintiff, but only in one or two as the defendant. He always argued his own cases, and the records show him to be the winning party in most of them. The conclusion might be drawn from a number of these suits that Levy was a headstrong and very argumentative person and perhaps overfond of litigation — all traits which might have made him unpopular. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many records show that the non-Jewish business fraternity, as far north as New England, put the utmost trust in him. Not only was he called to act as a mediator in a number of Gentile business disputes, but several non-Jewish merchants even made him executor of their estates. Nor was his influence limited to the state of New York. In a court case in Connecticut, where he appeared as a witness to plead for the remission of a fine imposed on a fellow-Jew, the judge acquiesced with the following words: "This is done out of respect to the heretofore mentioned Asser Levy."

Asser Levy van Swellen died in the year 1682, leaving a considerable estate.

It would appear to be rather difficult to determine an ancestor's character three centuries later, but, if one believes in the theory of genealogically determined character formation, then this writer recognizes Asser Levy's positive qualities in a number of his twentieth century's blood-relations, to wit, his great concern for social justice, his sense of leadership and other positive character traits, though admittedly also quite a few negative ones.

So far as the Jew, Asser Levy, is concerned, it must not be overlooked that he was perhaps the only Ashkenazi amongst the Sephardic Jews in the young American colony, the latter being practically all ex-Marranos and first generation residents in the Dutch Republic, all from a quite different background, culture and walk of life. Levy, with a German-Dutch “bourgeois” commercial background, must have felt far more at ease with the non-Jewish New Amsterdam trading fraternity than with his more aristocratic Sephardic co-religionists.

This reasoning is strengthened by the fact that it does not appear that Asser Levy was in any way involved in strictly religious Jewish affairs, certainly not in the founding of the earliest local Jewish congregation, which *ipso facto* was a Sephardic one. His name, therefore, does not appear in the two requests for a plot for a Jewish burial ground, submitted in July, 1655 and February, 1656, which petitions show only the names of three prominent Sephardic residents.

His experiences in the Brazilian Dutch colony, together with his knowledge of the letter of thanks with directives about equal status for Jews, must have made him quite confident that his almost personal battle with Governor Peter Stuyvesant would end in his favor. He proved to be right.

It is thus apt that almost two and a half centuries later, on the 22nd of January, 1920, on the occasion of a gala dinner of the Jewish Historical Society of England, the main speaker, the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Mr. A. Davis, praised Asser Levy's steadfast character and deep sense of social consciousness, by summing up his achievements with the words:

... Asser Levy, through whom and since when the Jews in America have demanded and have exercised the right, with their compatriots, to stand guard over American Liberty.

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1. Particulars on the life of my ancestor, Asser Levy van Swellem, form a separate chapter in the unpublished *Der Prins en Boek* (Book of the Prins family), written in Dutch and existing in manuscript form only. The work contains the complete genealogy and chronicles of my family on my father's side from the year 1500 until the present day, compiled by my late uncle, the former Dutch Historian and Doctor of Law, Izak Prins, who died in Israel in the late 1960s. He was the co-founder of the Netherlands Society for the Science of Judaism, and an authority on Marrano history. It took him many years to complete his research on all aspects of the subject. Shortly after his death, the entire manuscript was placed in the custody of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Only lately has the whole manuscript been photo-copied and bound in two volumes, which have been handed to some members of the family of Maurits Prins. For the original document see the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.



# *Imagining Argentina*

*A Review-essay by* ILAN STAVANS

*Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature From Gerchunoff to Szichman.* By NAOMI LINDSTROM. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. 205 pp.

IN *THE OLD PATAGONIAN EXPRESS*, THE celebrated travel writer, Paul Theroux, calls Buenos Aires the city of melancholy and nostalgia. One need only listen to the music of Carlos Gardel, the town's most legendary singer of tangos, to know that it is true. His ballads tell of men betrayed by their voluptuous lovers, of fathers whose eight-year-old sons suddenly die, of exiled artists longing for their Argentina from the remoteness of Paris. A few hours after arriving in town, the spirit of sadness and wistfulness abruptly overtakes the visitor. One can smell it in the air, see it on people's faces, on the front pages of newspapers, in the urban architecture. And it is even more vivid in the nation's literature. And, like Leonard Zelig, Woody Allen's 1983 film character who, in the 20s and 30s supposedly intertwines himself with Adolf Hitler and Pope Pius XI at the Vatican, the Argentinian Jews, like chameleons, embody their culture. The melancholic character and the nostalgic facade are visible when one opens a book by Alberto Gerchunoff, the grandfather of Argentine Jewish letters, or a collection of verses by Israel Zeitlin, one of the most important Jewish ethnic poets. Just as Phillip Roth or Saul Bellow are thermometers of life in the United States, these writers are candid examples of the Argentinian idiosyncrasy.

Even after some academic efforts, most people abroad know next to nothing about the Jewish community of Buenos Aires.<sup>1</sup> And, whatever they do know, they surely learned it from Jacobo Timerman's 1981 autobiographical account of the military repression of the 70s, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. Or, perhaps, they know it from some old Yiddish stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer or Sholom Aleichem, about female characters who flee to Argentina and become prostitutes. With some luck, perhaps, a few curious readers could have read a sample of the extraordinary narrations by the great Jorge Luis Borges, the author of *Ficciones* and some remarkable quasi-essays on Miguel de Cervantes, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Gustav Flaubert. A few have Hebraic symbols. One of them is "Emma Zunz," a description of a theodicy where a young Jewish woman takes revenge against the perpetrator of her father's death. And another, "The Secret Miracle," loosely based on the life of Franz

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1. Judith Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

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ILAN STAVANS, a Mexican novelist and art critic, teaches at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

Kafka, tells about the final moments of one Jaromir Hladik, a Prague dramatist and translator, who is about to be executed by a Nazi firing squad. But, of course, these texts give only a partial view.

Nowadays, Moacyr Scliar, the award-winning Brazilian fabulist, author of *The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes*, has received most of the attention that the United States and Europe seem capable of offering to the literature created by Jews in this region of the southern hemisphere. Yet, it is only a grain of sand in a vast desert. Much of what has been written there has emerged mainly from Argentina, the country with the biggest Jewish population (almost half a million). One or two titles, most notably Timerman's book and Alberto Gerchunoff's *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*,<sup>2</sup> a collection of vignettes written in 1910 to celebrate the nation's centennial, have circulated in translation. But, for the most part, the texts remain unknown beyond the national border. Quite sad, I should add, knowing that the library which these writers have so painfully built hides not only a handful of unforgettable volumes and metaphors, but an important facet of modern Jewish history.

That is why Naomi Lindstrom's comprehensive and detailed study, *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature*, is most welcome. It is devoted to the analysis of eight of these writers, in a time range which reaches back to the late nineteenth century. During the 1980s, a couple of panoramic volumes on the subject were made available in Spanish. One, by Leonardo Senkman, centered on the life and art of Gerchunoff, and elaborated a kind of *Resektionsgeschichte*, detailing how his audience and his successors assimilated his craft, enthusiasm and ideology. The other, by Saul Sosnowski, discussed the *oeuvre* of three writers, all born in or after 1936: Germán Rozenmacher, Gerardo Mario Goloboff, and Mario Szichman.<sup>3</sup> But, before these two titles, only scattered essays and reviews had appeared. Hence, Lindstrom's achievement is to have published her critical analysis in a language where the ignorance on the topic is overwhelming.<sup>4</sup>

The first Jewish immigrants to arrive at what is now known as Argentina were Sephardic, most of them *conversos* persecuted by the Inquisition and expelled from Spain in 1492. The Catholic regime, during the Colonial period, took care to force most of these individuals to assimilate. The Ashkenazic waves began in the late 1860s and, not until two decades later can the foundation of their communal institutions and *Kehilá* be traced. Beginning in 1881, with danger and anti-Semitism growing rap-

2. The book was translated into English by Prudencio de Pereda (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1955).

3. Leonardo Senkman, *La identidad judía en la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pades, 1983); Saul Sosnowski, *La orilla inminente. Escritores judíos argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Legasa-Omnibus, 1987).

4. In Spanish, "America Latina y su pluma judía," my review of this book, together with that of Robert F. DiAntonio, *Brazilian Fiction: Aspects and Evolution of the Contemporary Narrative* (University of Arkansas Press, 1989), appeared in *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. XLIII, num. 1, June 1990: 114-117.

idly in Russia, Poland and some other regions of Eastern Europe, the dreams of building a Promised Land in Buenos Aires and its provinces were shared by many, among them Barón Maurice de Hirsch (1831–1896), who put millions into transporting poor *shtetl* Jews to the area near Patagonia. Immigration quotas were opened, and the government was issuing invitations for settlement in unpopulated regions.

Some 160,000 Jews arrived between 1889 and 1914. In the imagination of these immigrants, the distant, semi-barbaric, almost fantastic territory at which they arrived was a source of anxiety. They did not know Spanish, nor did they understand the local manners and folklore. Yet, they hoped, as immigrants always do, that the country would eventually become a healthy, progressive environment in which to build a new existence, and perhaps even lead to a new Jewish homeland. That hope was temporarily shared by members of the World Zionist Congress, including Theodor Herzl.

But, somewhere along the line, optimism went sour. Gerchunoff, the first Argentinian Jew to achieve prominence as an *homme de lettres*, paradigmatically traveled from one extreme to the next, from hope to despair. His odyssey was not unlike that of many others. A Russian-born worker, he manifested a feverish desire to learn Cervantes' idiom, and that, along with his early glorification of the democratic life in Argentina, made Gerchunoff a popular leader and a much-read journalist and writer. All through his early adult life, he was active in the national debate regarding religious freedom, civil rights and assimilation. In total, he wrote almost twenty books. He also befriended prominent intellectuals and artists, among them Borges and his mentor, Leopoldo Lugones,<sup>5</sup> an important Modernist poet who, at the end of his life, was also disenchanted with politics Argentine-style, which had turned into Fascism. At first, Gerchunoff believed that Argentina would become the perfect habitat for his co-religionists. *The Jewish Gauchos*, published originally as a series in the prestigious Buenos Aires daily, *La Nación*, where he was part of the staff since 1908, was written with such euphoric sentiments. But anti-Semitism set in. There were pogroms like the one of the so-called *semana trágica* or Tragic Week (January 7th through 12th, 1919), which broke out at the Vasena metal-working plant, and in which the government blamed the Russian immigrants for their communist and anarchist activities. Gerchunoff's hopes were dashed. Slowly, he turned his face away from public life, and consciously forced himself into seclusion. His later artistic period is characterized by abstract literary subjects, and by a profound disenchantment with his milieu.<sup>6</sup> He died in 1950, aged sixty six, sad and ashamed.

5. Lugones, a colleague of Rubén Darío, is the author of *Centennial Odes* (1910), as well as of many collections of stories, poems and essays.

6. There is plenty written about him. See *Alberto Gerchunoff: Vida y obra* (New York: Columbia University/Hispanic Institute, 1957); Lázaro Liacho's *Alberto Gerchunoff* (Buenos Aires: Colombo, 1975); and my review-essay, "Alberto Gerchunoff and the Jewish Writer

Those after him learned to be less naïve about intolerance.

The key-word here is intolerance. A deeply-rooted feeling at the heart of Argentine life, it is the product of centuries of the narrowmindedness generated by the Catholic Church. It can be traced to the feudal metabolism that prevailed in sixteenth-century Spain, when the knights-turned-into conquerors, inspired by Machiavelli, got ready for their journey into the newly-discovered colonies, destroying everything they saw, and repressing the pre-Columbian religions. Such a hostile atmosphere is not unique to Gerchunoff's country; it exists as well all over Hispanic America, coloring the way people perceive themselves, and how they see history.

By the time that Juan Domingo Perón and his wife, Evita, with their populist facade, came to power in 1946, the entire panorama had changed. Upward mobility, individual achievement, and the mere idea of democracy, were now not only in question, but were heavily attacked. Since its emergence as a nation, Argentina, especially under the Juan Manuel de Rosas dictatorship (1829-1832, 1835-1852), has always nurtured a singular national self-image. Although it considers itself part of the South American hemisphere, it looks to the Old Continent for companionship because it is mainly composed of Italian, British and other European immigrants. Compared to other countries in the region, it had a small Indian population when the Spaniards arrived, and — unlike what took place in Mexico or Peru — little if any ethnic mixture occurred. This makes the population at large mainly Caucasian. And the intellectuals, politicians and artists, feeling a sense of sophistication and superiority, believe that their true ancestors belong to Europe, not to the pre-Conquest past. Because of its high anti-Communist ingredient, when the Peronist movement took over, it targeted Jews (*los rusos*) for attack. They were seen as traitors, as Russian spies. Although this anti-Semitic stereotype dates back to the *semana trágica* of 1919, in the late 40s and 50s it acquired a new breadth. Actually, anti-Semitism, one of the many "issues" examined in Lindstrom's study — the others are Jewish identity, self-hatred, and exile — is rooted in the double-faceted attitude with which Jews were welcomed. They had been invited, and there were policies to place them and help them start up a new existence. Yet, an antagonistic feeling about their undesirability was always in the atmosphere. Putting aside the pogroms and riots, since 1891, when Julián Martel wrote *La Bolsa* (The Stock Market), a text that blamed Jews for their involvement in capitalistic, unmerciful enterprises, numerous anti-Semitic titles have appeared, including *El Kahal* and *Oro*, two infamous novels published in 1938 by Hugo Wast.<sup>7</sup> And the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* sells very well in Argentina,

in Argentina," *Prooftexts* vol. 9, no. 2, May 1989: 184–194. In it I discuss the above-mentioned works of Senkman and Sosnowski, and examine Gerchunoff's passion for the Spanish language, as well as for his most beloved novel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

7. This was the penname of Gustavo Martínez Zuviría.

as it does in Hispanic America at large. This craze has even involved some distinguished, tolerant, non-Jews (Borges, among them) who sooner or later have also become targets of the collective animosity. Through the years, there have been three different reactions to the Jews' divided reception: one, assimilation; the second, after 1948 and during the 60s, emigration to the State of Israel; the third, ostracism. In one way or another, all of the writers after Gerchunoff have been forced to choose one of these three alternatives.

The book under review begins with an introduction that places the reader in the historical background, from the first immigration waves until the 1970s, during the so-called *guerra sucia* or dirty war. The postface goes even further. It discusses the literature written by Argentinian exiles, all of Jewish origin, in Madrid, Paris, New York, and Mexico City. Yet, Lindstrom's intelligence and critical eye are most effective when dealing with eight individual writers. She starts with Gerchunoff, whose *Gauchos*<sup>8</sup> were bucolic creatures living in Entre Ríos, a kind of *shtetl* in La Pampa. Immediately afterwards, she moves to Israel Zeitlin, thanks to whom Jewish literature in the country acquired a metropolitan setting. An essayist and poet whose lyrics fought racism and intolerance, Zeitlin followed the tradition of Sephardic and Yiddish literature by using pseudonyms. Under the name César Tiempo, he wrote most of his work, including *Sabación argentino* (Great Argentine Sabbath, 1933), one of his most famous collections of verses. Yet, a few years earlier, in 1926, he came out with *Versos de una . . .* (Verses of a . . .), under the penname of Clara Beter, convincing many readers and colleagues that the female author was actually a prostitute who had suddenly emerged with a magnificent, harmonious ear and a strong, poetic voice. The hoax lasted for five editions, and when the truth was discovered, it created a huge controversy. Several years later, Zeitlin, who was also a playwright, wrote two controversial dramas: *El teatro soy yo* (I am The Theater, 1933), about a black playwright and his Jewish enemy, and *Pan criollo* (Creole Bread, 1938),<sup>9</sup> about Jewish assimilationist trends.

Although all of the books commented on in Lindstrom's study were originally written in Spanish, one of the interesting features in her analysis is the legacy of Yiddish and Hebrew in Argentina. She talks about *Di Yiddische Tsaitung* (1914-1974). She concentrates on the empathy between Gerchunoff and Saul Tchernihovsky, and discusses Zeitlin's odes to Haim Najman Bialik. Yet, she could have also added a few lines about his trib-

8. The *Gauchos*, needless to say, were not a product of Gerchunoff's imagination. There is a rich, long-lasting tradition of Gaucho literature in Argentina, which includes José Hernández's *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, as well as works by Hilario Ascasubi, Ventura R. Lynch, and Estanislao del Campo. In fact, long after *The Jewish Gauchos* was published in book form, Borges complained that Jews were businessmen and entrepreneurs, not rural cowboys.

9. This second title won the National Theater Prize.

utes to Sholom Aleichem and Itzjok Leibush Peretz, included in a 1943 volume on his journalism and interviews. But, for the most part, her comparative views are illuminating.

Next are the novels by Bernardo Verbitsky, especially his 1941 *Es difícil empezar a vivir* (It's Hard To Start Living), a realistic account of a Jewish medical student who is also a writer and a voracious reader, always ready to understand his religious and cultural identity, and to explore the answers given by secular Hebraic writings. Because Zeitlin's lyricism did not go far enough in questioning Argentinian social arrangements, the trend set by Gerchunoff to praise Argentina as a possible homeland, according to Lindstrom, was still unquestioned when Verbitsky began writing. And it was he, at age 34, who acquired prominence by bringing the uncomfortable Jewish feelings toward the nation to a more critical, open discussion. He did so by opening new questions for those children of immigrants ready to examine their role in the oppressive environment. Lindstrom also shows how, after Zeitlin and with Verbitsky, Argentinian Jewish literature chose, as its traditional setting, Buenos Aires, with all of its urban pathos.

But answers have not come easily. Dissatisfaction and increasing depression have overwhelmed the community. Other authors analyzed by Lindstrom are David Viñas, who, in 1966, published a novel about the *semana trágica* pogrom, and, four years before, *Dar la cara* (Making a Stand), a book claiming that Jews are essentially and eternally outcasts, and that their responsibility is not to integrate into the mainstream but consciously to assure their dissident role. After Viñas comes José Rabinovich, the poet who died in 1978, and the author of *El violinista bajo el tejado* (Fiddler Under the Roof), an uncomplicated book that attempted to find an unsentimental vision of Jewish history. And another subject of study is Mario Szichman, the author of *At 8:25, Evita Became Immortal*,<sup>10</sup> who bases his style on the great family saga popularized by Russian and Yiddish literature (the brothers Singer, Leo Tolstoi, Der Nister, *et al.*), and famous in Hispanic America in the pen of Gabriel García Márquez. His style, nevertheless, is not akin to magical-realism. On the contrary, he takes realism and naturalism to an extreme, and uses irony to comment on the Jewish *angst* in Buenos Aires.

The final author studied by Lindstrom is Marcos Ricardo Barnatán, who is still exiled in Spain and who, heavily influenced by the kabbalistic themes in Borges and the scholarship of Gershom Scholem, has written a handful of novels dealing with secret word messages and crossword puzzles. Instead of him, I believe, a more comprehensive examination of Gerardo Mario Goloboff should have been included. He is a remarkable narrator whose trilogy, consisting of *Criador de palomas* (Pigeon Raiser), *La*

10. Translated into English by Roberto Picchiotto (New Hampshire: Ediciones del Norte, 1983).

*luna que cae* (The Falling Moon), and *El soñador de Smith* (The Dreamer of Smith),<sup>11</sup> swings between an urban and a rural setting, between Gerchunoff and Zeitlin, between the naïve perception of a child and that of adults. It may well be the most admirable, harmonious prose ever written by a Jew from Buenos Aires.

Often, Argentinian Jewish essays are permeated by trendy philosophical terminology, borrowing from Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Freud. They are too discursive, too analytical. They are a vivid expression of a deeply-rooted drive to intellectualize everything, to explain scientifically the collective melancholia as well as the mysterious forces that impede people's happiness. One of the decisive influences on the genre, as cultivated by this ethnic literature, has been Albert Memmi, a Tunisian essayist who belonged to the French existentialist group of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. He wrote *Portrait d'un juif* (Portrait of a Jew) in 1962, and his outstanding achievement was to place the Jewish question in a broader social context, and to discuss freedom and dependency. In Argentina, his views were both illuminating and a form of liberation. Beginning with León Rozitchner, a well-known psychoanalyst who adapted Memmi's ideas to his surroundings in *Ser judío* (To be A Jew, 1967), many writers, some with Leftist inclinations, thought that, to understand their chameleon-like existence, they had to apply the Tunisian's *Weltanschauung*.

As a whole, the melancholy and tension of Jewish writing in Argentina, exuberant and rich, contrasts with the exoticism used by Jewish authors in other countries of the region.<sup>12</sup> And that is precisely the national trademark. The books of Gerchunoff, Zeitlin, Verbitsky, Szichman, and the others, belong to this unique group only because they deal with the nostalgia and depression of modern urban life, and with the need to cope with hopes that are smashed irreparably. (In Mexico and Brazil, to use two other nations as examples, the expectations of Jewish immigrants were more fulfilled.)

A few internationally acclaimed South American novelists, all Gentiles, have taken upon themselves the challenge to create Jewish characters. Among them is Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian writer and diplomat, whose book, *The Story-Teller*, describes the adventures of an anthropology student of Hebraic heritage who decides to give up contemporary urban life and join the Machiguenga Indians in the Amazon forest.<sup>13</sup> Car-

11. Published in Barcelona by Muchnik (1990, 1991).

12. Two other writers of interest are Isaac Goldemberg, Peruvian, whose first novel, *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* (Pocket Books, 1978), deals with an inter-marriage, half-Jewish, half-Quechua; and Victor Perera, whose collection of vignettes, *Rites: A Guatemalan Childhood* (Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1986), originally written in English, describes the author's growing up Jewish in Guatemala. But with time and patience, the curious reader should also find great pleasure in the *oeuvres* of Clarise Lispector, Germán Rozenmacher, Alcina Lubitch Domecq, and Luis Reznik.

13. Translated by Helen Lane (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989). See my article



los Fuentes has also written three novels, which deal with the Holocaust (*A Change of Skin*, 1967), the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (*The Hydra's Head*, 1975), and the Sephardic expulsion (*Terra Nostra*, 1975).<sup>14</sup> What Lindstrom does not try to do is to examine the Hebraic elements in the texts written by Gentiles in Argentina, from Borges to Cortázar, writer of *Hopscotch*. In the case of Borges, author of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the reason is clear. Many have already done the job, including Edna Aizenberg, whose doctoral dissertation, *The Aleph Weaver*,<sup>15</sup> analyzes the life and art of this most extraordinary writer, who, together with Vladimir Nabokov, can be considered the fathers of post-Modernism. But about Cortázar's work, including his story, "Press Clips" (*We Loved Glenda So Much, and Other Stories*), in which he uses a Jewish widow as an allegory for the victimization of the *guerra sucia*, nothing compelling has been written. Nor has anything compelling been written on other Gentile Argentine writers, such as the novelist and essayist, Ernesto Sábato (*The Tunnel*), who wrote on Albert Einstein and Kafka. Clearly, that critical job has been left by Lindstrom for some other time, or for somebody else. But with or without this topic, *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature* is an ambitious, clear and fascinating volume, one which will open new doors for further research.

In retrospect, it seems that the continent discovered by Columbus in 1492 has always been the subject of fantastic distortion. The admiral began the first of his four voyages not in search of a new land but looking for Cipango, a fabulous island that Marco Polo described in his diaries. The Spanish conquerors who came to the Americas in 1524 were anxious to find El Dorado, a territory full of gold. Then came the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch. Everybody tried to find in this much-abused geographical area something that was never there. And, of course, one needs also to include the Jews on this list. While in Eastern Europe, their imaginary portrait of Argentina was that of a place of liberty, progress and mutual respect. Obviously, they didn't find that, but it took them several generations to realize that they had been misled. Because art is the only ticket to redemption for secular Judaism, the testimony of their ordeal, of their ups and downs, and of the misadventures of their collective spirit, is the library which they have so carefully constructed. It is a library of nostalgic books describing their desire to find a forbidden happiness, and their need to enter a non-existent Paradise.

"(Mis)fortunes of a Novelist," *The World & I*, December 1989: 440–446.

14. See my "Perfil del judío en La cabeza de la hidra de Carlos Fuentes," *La historia de la literatura iberoamericana*, edited by Rachel Chang-Rodríguez and Graciella de Baer (New Hampshire: Ediciones del Norte, 1989), pp. 235–242.

15. Maryland: Scripta Humanistica, 1984. See my review-essay, "Borges and the Jews," *Prooftexts* vol. 7, num. 1, January 1989: 96–105. Also, Jaime Alazraki's volume, *Borges and the Kabbalah, and Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988), as well as Myrna Solotorevsky's essay, "The Model of Midrash and Borges' Interpretive Tales and Essays," *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 253–264. I have contributed to the theme with "Emma Zunz: The Jewish Theodicy of Jorge Luis Borges," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, num. 3, Autumn 1986: 469–475.

# *The Hebrew Roots of the English Language*

Review-Essay by LAWRENCE BESSERMAN

*The Word: The Dictionary that Reveals the Source of English.* By ISAAC E. MOZESON. New York, Shapolsky Publishers, 1989.

WAS THERE EVER A SINGLE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE that was spoken by all of the earth's inhabitants? According to the well-known story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11:1–9, the answer, of course, is yes. For, once upon a time, "All the earth had the same language and the same words" (v. 1); but as punishment for mankind's presumption in trying to build "a city and a tower with its top in the sky" (v.4) — a tower from which to wage war on God, one midrash says, or a tower built to shore up the firmament and thereby prevent another flood, says another midrash — "the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth" (v.9). Though the Bible does not say so explicitly, the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of this episode in Genesis has it that the *Ursprache* of mankind at Babel was Hebrew. Thus, Rashi comments on Genesis 11:1 that "*safa ehat*" (one, i.e., the same language) refers to *lashon hakodesh* (the holy language, i.e., Hebrew). And Augustine writes in *The City of God*: "... for there was only one language before the Flood ... so, also, when the nations received the merited punishment for their impious presumption and were divided by diversity of languages ... even then there existed one family, the family of Heber, in which the language which was formerly that of all mankind could continue ... This explains why this language was thenceforward called Hebrew" (Book XVI, Chapter 11 [Penguin ed.], pp. 667–68.)

A story told by the Greek historian, Herodotus, introduces another contestant with a claim to priority as the first natural language. Less well-known than the Tower of Babel story, it purports to give the results of an experiment into the origin of language by the Egyptian ruler, Psammetichus. Briefly, the story is as follows:

Psammetichus, finding that mere inquiry failed to reveal that which was the original race of mankind, devised an ingenious method of determining the matter. He took at random, from an ordinary family, two newly born infants, and gave them to a shepherd to be brought up amongst his flocks, under strict orders that no one should utter a word in their presence. They

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LAWRENCE BESSERMAN is Associate Professor of English at The Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

were to be kept by themselves in a lonely cottage, and the shepherd was to bring in goats from time to time, to see that the babies had enough milk to drink, and to look after them in any other way that was necessary. All these arrangements were made by Psammetichus because he wished to find out what word the children would first utter, once they had grown out of their meaningless baby-talk. The plan succeeded; two years later the shepherd, who during that time had done everything he had been told to do, happened one day to open the door of the cottage and to go in, when both children, running up to him with hands outstretched, pronounced the word “becos” . . .

The shepherd informed Psammetichus, who immediately had the children brought to him, and, when he himself heard them say *becos*, he at once set about trying to find out to what language the word belonged. His inquiries soon revealed that *becos* was Phrygian for bread, whereupon the Egyptian ruler was led to admit “the superior antiquity of the Phrygians,” (*The Histories* 2.2 [Penguin Books, 1972, rpt. 1988], pp. 129–30.)

Isaac E. Mozeson’s *The Word* starts from the assumption that the myth of a single language spoken by all mankind at some distant time in the prehistorical past is literally true. “Let us remove the sands of millennia. We are deep in the valley of Shinar,” Mozeson writes, “reconstructing the Tower of Babel — one brick, one word at a time” (p. 1). Ignoring Mozeson’s ominous metaphorical invitation to reconstruct the Tower of Babel, we note that the thesis underlying Mozeson’s most unusual dictionary of English etymology is that Hebrew is that *Ursprache*, the one original language from which all others derive. Mozeson does not mention Herodotus’ account of the claim of Phrygian to priority over all other languages; however, judging by the ingenuity of his argumentation in the book under review, he would no doubt be able to explain away the Phrygian claim handily. He would surely aver that the word *becos* in Herodotus’ story is not Phrygian for bread but really Hebrew, probably a slightly deformed uttering of *bakos* (in the cup), as the children asked for milk. For Mozeson truly believes that “[o]nly after mastering Hebrew can a person fully understand words in English, Basque, or Swahili” (p.3) — *or in any other language*.

Mozeson’s argument with traditional philology is strident in the extreme. His title uses the word “reveals” because he alleges that there has been a conspiracy to conceal the truth about the English language — the truth, that is, about its Hebrew roots. But only readers who take the Tower of Babel story literally, and assume that the single language referred to there is Hebrew, are likely to believe the claim advanced in the “Fore-Word” of this book that if you read on “You will soon know that you’ve never heard a word that wasn’t Hebrew.” I, for one, have read on, and I am certainly not convinced. Though Mozeson admits that many English words still escape his net, he promises a second edition which will include the words omitted in the present one. For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the orthodox brand of comparative philology that Mozeson is seeking to discredit, some background is in order.

Today, most scholars believe that neither Phrygian (an extinct language spoken by the people of Phrygia in central Asia Minor around 1200 B.C.E.), nor Hebrew, nor Egyptian (also extinct), nor any other language, can claim with any certainty to be the oldest or the original of languages. The best that comparative philology — a humanistic science slightly over two hundred years old — can do is to reconstruct the forms and structures that underlie languages related by internal factors such as phonology, morphology, lexis, and syntax, and by external factors such as geography and economic and political history. Let it be said at the outset that much remains speculative and controversial in this domain of knowledge. What Voltaire is reported to have said about philology still seems to be the case: it is a science in which it sometimes seems that consonants count for little and vowels count for nothing. And yet, a great edifice of scholarship — not a Tower of Babel but an open, critical, scholarly construct — has been built up by scholars around the globe.

Some of the main language families hypothesized by these scholars include the Sino-Tibetan family (usually subdivided into the Tibeto-Burman, Chinese, and Thai subfamilies); the Indo-European family (still represented today by dialects or branches such as Indic and Iranian, Greek, Armenian, Slavic, Baltic, Albanian, Celtic, Italic, and Germanic; and including two branches of now-dead languages, Hittite and Tocharian); the Hamito-Semitic (or Afroasiatic) family; the Uralic and Altaic (or Ural-Altaic) family; the Finno-Ugric (a subdivision of the Uralic group of tongues); and others. The Semitic language family includes living and dead languages such as Akkadian, Arabic, Coptic, Hebrew, Moabite, Phoenician, Syriac, and Ugaritic.

Modern English, as a Germanic language, still has much in common with modern German, Dutch, and the modern Scandinavian languages. Old English (the form of the language from around 700–1100 C.E.) was even more like German in its vocabulary and syntax. The principal languages, from which English has borrowed vocabulary, idioms, and even syntactic structures, are Greek, Latin, and French — especially French, which left a deep and lasting imprint on English after the Norman Conquest of 1066 and throughout most of what is known as the Middle English period (c.1100–1500 C.E.), when French became the language of high culture and religious and secular English officialdom. The latter highly unusual and formative episode of French dominance in the history of English (about which Mozeson has nothing to say) lasted until the re-emergence of English in the late fourteenth century.

As the reader will observe, according to the above sketch of linguistic affiliations, Hebrew and English have no direct contact. Nevertheless, because of the influence of the Bible and Judeo-Christian culture on the English language, it is clear that the imprint of Hebrew on English is more significant than that of such Semitic languages as Arabic or Amharic. The

literature on the entire subject of language families in general, and on the history of English in particular, is vast.<sup>1</sup>

Without regard for the work of previous tillers of this ample plot ground, and, in the spirit of Voltaire, without much regard for consonants or vowels that stand in the way, Mozeson claims to have traced over 20,000 English words to Hebrew roots. Many of the associations drawn by him between Hebrew and English words are, at the very least, interesting, often entertaining, and some might even be plausibly adduced as evidence of a possible genetic affiliation between the languages (e.g., see the entries for *crush*, *cry*, *sore*, etc.); but, aside from the cultural chauvinism and religious passion, what is Mozeson really shouting about? Do the English words *navy* and *navigate* really have anything to do with the Hebrew *naivekh*, as Mozeson alleges? Would it not be more pertinent to acknowledge the information provided by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, that Latin *navis* (ship) and Latin *navem agere* (to drive a ship) are the obvious etymons of *navy* and *navigate*, respectively? Mozeson's free-wheeling entries, proposing a connection between *origin* and *ayin* (p. 118), *sparrow* and

1. The interested reader might find it useful to consult the following excellent brief essays readily available in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1969): Morton W. Bloomfield, "A Brief History of the English Language," and Calvert Watkins, "The Indo-European Origin of English." The *American Heritage Dictionary* also includes an appendix of reconstructed Indo-European roots to which most of the words listed in the dictionary are traced; and, in 1986, Houghton Mifflin published a much expanded version of this appendix as a separate *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, edited by Calvert Watkins. Another worthwhile and readily available book that will help readers put Mozeson's sensationalistic claims in perspective is Robert Claiborne's *The Roots of English: A Reader's Handbook of Word Origins* (New York: Times Books, 1989). This is a good non-technical attempt to trace English vocabulary back to Indo-European. Claiborne's *The Roots of English* is especially relevant to our present purpose because it is organized as a dictionary, with alphabetical entries of Indo-European roots and an index of English words, much the same as Mozeson's *The Word* — except that Mozeson's roots are Hebrew!

To be sure, certain aspects of the Indo-European hypothesis are still being debated and some scholars are still at work trying to find a genetic relationship between Hebrew and English (i.e., between the distant ancestors of these two languages). In a recent unpublished paper entitled "Colonial American Belief in Hebrew as the Primal Language," presented to the conference on "Hebrew and the Bible in Colonial America" at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, May 22 1990, Professor R.W. Wescott offers a brief synopsis of some of the arguments for a Hebrew-English connection. Among the recent studies along these same lines that Wescott cites is Allan R. Bomhard's *Toward Proto-Nostratic: A New Approach* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, Pa.: John Benjamin's Publishing Co., 1984). Bomhard's wide-ranging and highly speculative study attempts to connect Proto-Indo-European language forms with so-called Proto-Afroasiatic forms (the Proto-Afroasiatic group of languages includes the Semitic, Egyptian, Berber, Cushitic, Omotic, and Chadic families). Bomhard, Wescott, and others are approaching the subject in a manner that contrasts markedly with Mozeson's. However, as Alan S. Kaye and Eugene Helimski note in their reviews of Bomhard's book (in *Language*, 61 [1985]: 887–91 and *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 [1987]: 97–100, respectively), the results so far are not particularly convincing. (I am grateful to Mr. Lippman Bodoff, Assistant Editor of JUDAISM, for bringing Prof. Wescott's essay to my attention).

*zippor* (p. 166), and *wet* and *ratov* (p. 194), are also much less convincing than the older etymologies for these words.<sup>2</sup>

Mozeson's book is passionate. He also has a sense of humor. The reader will enjoy the frequent flashes of (pseudo-) recognition. And, even though the book does not add to our knowledge of the origins of the English language, it will make readers pay attention to the sound and meaning of words in ways that they have not thought about before. The tone and spirit of triumphalism in this book, however, is disturbing; it does not make for rigorous, objective, scientific, and historically informed inquiry.

For Mozeson, Hebrew seems to have no history, no Greek or Persian loan words, no kinship with other attested ancient Semitic languages. To be sure, Claiborne's more conventional and not very precise etymological dictionary also sometimes makes fanciful etymological flights, to account for the approximately 300,000 English words that its Indo-European roots can allegedly explain. But the crucial difference is that Mozeson's hypothesis is supported exclusively by the weak evidence of unsystematic, fast and loose play with the consonants and vowels of the vocabularies of English and Hebrew, and not by the weighty, systematic evidence of history and geography, and the demonstrable systematic, morphological, and syntactic affinities between English and its hypothetical Indo-European ancestor — evidence gathered over hundreds of years by scholars in many lands, conversant with many languages.

To provide readers with an idea of what traditional comparative philology does — and, therefore, with an idea of what Mozeson would really have to do next if he wished to add substance to his claim that English derives from Hebrew — I shall summarize briefly Grimm's Law and Verner's Law, two of the most important philological laws explaining the history and development of English in the context of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family.

In 1822, Jakob Grimm (the same Grimm who, together with his brother Wilhelm, collected and published German folk tales) proposed an explanation for certain systematic differences observed among the Indo-European languages. Grimm's Law (also known as "The First Consonant Shift") identified three successive changes in the pronunciation of certain Indo-European (IE) consonants by speakers of the Germanic (Gmc) branches of the language. The changes which Grimm identified explain why English speakers pronounce certain words differently than French, Greek, Italian, and other Indo-European-based language speakers. The cause of the changes which Grimm studied is unknown, but the "substratum theory" is a plausible explanation. According to this theory, a group of non-Indo European speakers who were learning the language substituted their own sounds for the Indo-European sounds that were un-

2. The etymologies repeated in the *American Heritage Dictionary* and by Claiborne trace these words to Indo-European *Er-<sup>1</sup>*, *Sper-<sup>3</sup>*, and *Wed-<sup>1</sup>*, respectively.



familiar to them — e.g., if their language had no aspirated stops (like the “pu” in pull), but did have voiced fricatives (like the “f” in fish), they might have changed IE aspirated stops to voiced fricatives, setting the whole system of consonant shifts in motion.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, sometime between 1000–400 B.C.E., at the beginnings of Primitive Germanic, the following changes occurred, in the following sequential stages: 1) IE aspirated voiced stops bh, dh, gh > [the symbol “>” should be read as “became” or “developed into”] Germanic (Gmc) voiced fricatives ð, ð̥, ȝ (later > b, d, g); 2) IE voiceless stops p, t, k > Gmc voiceless fricatives f, θ, and x [> h initially]; and 3) IE voiced stops, b, d, g > Gmc voiceless stops p, t, k. These changes explain the difference between the English-German-based words like father, fish, brother, thou, and three, compared to non-Germanic Latin words like pater, piscis, frater, tū, and tres, respectively.

In 1875, the Danish scholar, Karl Verner, advanced a theory to explain certain exceptions to Grimm’s Law that had been troubling philologists. As we have just seen (stage 2 above) Grimm’s Law maintained that the IE voiceless stops p, t, k became Gmc voiceless fricatives f, θ, x [or h]. But, in some Germanic words we find the voiced fricatives ð, ð̥, ȝ, (or their later developments) instead of f, θ, x [or h]. For example, we would expect the ‘t’ in Latin *pater* and Greek *patēr* to correspond to ‘θ’ [theta: ‘ə’] in Germanic forms of the Indo-European word \**patēr*, but instead we find Gothic *fadar* (the ‘d’ here representing the voiced interdental fricative [ð]), Icelandic *faðir*, and Old English *fæder* (the ‘d’ in *fæder* is a later development

3. For those unfamiliar with the technical terms and symbols that linguists and philologists use to describe sounds, a few guidelines will be helpful. Aspirated sounds are pronounced with a puff of air, as in the “pu” of “pull.” Fricatives or continuants (these are synonymous terms) are sounds which can be extended in pronunciation, as opposed to “stops” which cannot (cp. the fricative “f” vs. the stop “p”). “Voiced” sounds are ones whose pronunciation involves vibration of the vocal chords. All vowels are by definition “voiced,” but even some consonants are. Thus, the difference between “b,” “d,” “g,” and “p,” “t,” “k,” which are voiced and unvoiced sounds respectively, can be heard — or felt — if they are pronounced with one’s hands over one’s ears; “b,” “d,” and “g” produce a vibration of the vocal chords (“voicing”) that is absent in the pronunciation of “p,” “t,” and “k.”

On symbols: “æ” (a Roman letter form known as “ligature a-e” or by its Anglo-Saxon name as “ash”) is pronounced like the vowel in ‘hand’; þ (called “thorn” in Anglo-Saxon) is pronounced either like the “th” in “thin” or the “th” in “this,” depending on its position in the word; θ (Greek theta) represents the “th” sound in “thin”; ˊ (an “ictus” or stress mark) marks where the stress — i.e., crest of loudness in pronunciation — on a word falls; ˉ (called a “macron”) indicates a long vowel; ə, called “schwa” (as in Hebrew), represents the middle vowel in “but.” The symbols ð, ð̥, and ȝ, represent the following sounds respectively: a sound between “b” and “v,” pronounced with continuous vibration of the lips; the sound represented by the “th” in this; and a sound like the “g” in “girl” but uttered continuously, with a simultaneous gargling sound in the back of the throat. The “x” represents a fricative sound pronounced either in the back of the throat or across the palate, depending on its position in the word (cp. German *nicht* vs. *nacht*.)

\* indicates that the word or form is unattested, but we hypothesize that it existed.



of an earlier [ð]; the fact that Modern English 'father' has an [ð] sound in place of a [d] sound is a later development). So it would appear that, contrary to Grimm's Law, IE 't' sometimes became ð instead of θ.

Verner's Law explained this seeming anomaly. He noticed that Proto-Germanic voiceless fricatives (f, θ, x, and s) became voiced fricatives (β, ð, γ, and z) unless they were prevented from doing so by any one of the following three conditions:

- i) being the first sound in a word;
- ii) being next to another voiceless sound; or
- iii) having the IE stress on the immediately preceding syllable.

To return to the example of the English word father, and filling in the steps down to Old English: the Indo-European sourced word *pātēr* (which also gave us, independently, the Latin word *pater*) developed into the Germanic *faōēr*, *faðēr*, and then *fáðer*, the West Germanic *fáder*, and the Old English *fæder*. Without going into further details, let it simply be stated that Verner's Law explains such anomalies of English grammar as the *was-were* and *dead-death* alternations.

If all this seems terribly complicated, that is because the history of the growth and development of the English language — if approached in a sound scientific manner — is a very complicated subject indeed. Until Mr. Mozeson can adduce general laws or principles of change within Hebrew in its different phases and among and between Hebrew and any of its supposed descendants to match the rigor of Grimm's Law and Verner's Law, his suggested Hebrew etymologies for English words will remain amusing but unconvincing. In fact, he would probably do best to leave English alone for awhile and go back to his Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Sanskrit grammars, and work from there.

A final note: for profound and stimulating philosophical reflections on the endlessly fascinating and difficult question of the origin of language, one may turn to the work of Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, a Christian theologian, converted from Judaism, who is well-known to many readers of this journal for his correspondence with Franz Rosenzweig. In a book called *The Origin of Speech* (1981), Rosenzweig-Huussy advances an existentialist claim — theoretically intriguing and highly plausible, given the lack of empirical evidence — regarding the priority of the imperative mood in the prehistory of all modern languages. His speculative sketch of a key to all grammars — linking what he calls the dramatic, lyrical, epical, and logical modes of discourse to the imperative, subjunctive, narrative, and classifying grammatical moods, respectively — with each of these in turn corresponding to a grammatical person: first person singular, first person plural, third person plural, and non-finite forms (infinitives, participles, verbal nouns), respectively — takes us beyond the entertaining but relatively trivial search for first roots (Ibid., pp. 68–73 *et passim*). Instead, it addresses in a stimulating and thought-provoking manner the really important question of how and why human beings began to speak in the first place.

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**The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History.** By Sophie DUBNOV-ERLICH. Trans., JUDITH VOWLES. Ed., JEFFREY SHANDLER. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 284 pp.

*Reviewed by* KEN FRIEDEN

BIOGRAPHY is not a salient Jewish literary genre. Outside of hasidic circles, which have produced memoirs in praise of their leaders ever since the Baal Shem Tov, individual personality has seldom been a primary concern. The Judaic tradition has emphasized texts, commentaries, halakhic discourses and aggadic tales, often leaving their authors' lives in relative obscurity. Yet, the biographical form, like cultural studies and social history in general, has attracted attention in recent years.

This biography, first published in Russian (1950) and only now translated into English, should help to revive popular and scholarly interest in one of the outstanding modern Jewish intellectuals. Simon Dubnov (1860-1941), author of a comprehensive *History of the Jews* and numerous other seminal works, made his mark as the pre-eminent Jewish historian since Heinrich Graetz. He set an exemplary precedent, moreover, by striving to effect social change in accordance with the conclusions of his research. His most original contribution to Jewish political thought may be summed up in the notion of "Diaspora nationalism," also known as "Jewish national autonomism," which focuses on the cultural dimension of collective Jewish identity. A biography of Dubnov is pertinent to twentieth-

century history, because his personal identity influenced his conception of a national Jewish identity distinct from territorial, Zionist goals.

Simon Dubnov was born in Mstislavl, Belorussia. Unable to enter the university system in Tsarist Russia, he pursued his education as an autodidact and devoted himself to the study of Jewish history. He engaged in journalistic writing to disseminate his ideas, providing a counterweight to the ever more popular Zionism, but he most valued his systematic scholarship on social and cultural aspects of Jewish history. While he penned his major works in Russian, he also wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew.

First printed in 1950, *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov* now appears in translation posthumously, five years after the death of Sophie Dubnov-Erllich. The work is astutely introduced by Jonathan Frankel, readably translated by Judith Vowles, knowledgeably edited by Jeffrey Shandler, and rounded out with an afterword by Victor Erlich. This biography, by Dubnov's eldest child, has a privileged status, although it draws heavily from Dubnov's autobiography (published in Russian). For the most part excluding personal recollections and shunning sentimentality, the author emphasizes Dubnov's philosophical commitments in the broader context of intellectual history.

Dubnov-Erllich argues that her father's life had "intrinsic unity" and endeavors to illustrate its inner logic — albeit "indissolubly linked to decades of Russian-Jewish history" (37). His was, according to the author, a "typical" life, though it may be more accurate to say that his path had typical beginnings in the Eastern European *heder*, and that he rebelled against traditional education in a way that was increasingly typical. Following his bar mizvah,

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KEN FRIEDEN is Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Languages and Literatures at Emory University.

Simon Dubnov went to live at a yeshiva run by his grandfather, Rabbi Bentsion Dubnov. In spite of his grandfather's proximity, Simon began to read forbidden books of modern European literature.

Jonathan Frankel provides a concise definition of Dubnov's influential yet now largely forgotten theory of Diaspora nationalism:

"[T]his theory states that even with the destruction of their state in 70 C.E. and their dispersal across the world, the Jews have remained a nation (albeit "nonterritorial" in character); that until the French Revolution and emancipation, the Jews had always been granted a large measure of internal self-government in the host states; that in the modern era, they should therefore lay claim in the various countries of the Diaspora not only to civil but also to national (that is, national minority) rights; and that national autonomy would enable them not only to run their own internal (above all, educational) affairs but also to defend their political interests more effectively both at home and abroad" (p. 1).

Dubnov began to develop the lineaments of this theory in the 1890s and expressed it forcefully in contrast to the "spiritual Zionism" of Ahad Ha-Am. Dubnov was even more skeptical of Herzl's "political Zionism" because he placed his primary emphasis on Jewish cultural and national autonomy in the Diaspora.

Taken to its logical conclusion, Diaspora nationalism might inspire radical changes in Jewish life as well as in Judaic studies. It would encourage respect for the value of Jewish culture as it has evolved around the world, challenging the presumed superiority of recent Israeli experiences. From a scholarly standpoint, it would call for greater attention to worldwide Jewish cultural traditions in the diverse realms of literature, philosophy,

music art, and science. Judaic literature (in several languages not limited to Hebrew and Yiddish), for example, would be placed on a par with other European national literatures. Jewish music and art would be recognized for their coherence and particularity. A century after Dubnov developed his views, such repercussions are only slowly gaining acceptance.

In relation to political Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel added significance to the original publication of this biography two years later. Perhaps Dubnov-Erich was motivated, in part, by a desire to reaffirm the importance of her father's achievements — at a time that combined euphoria over Israeli statehood and anguish after the Holocaust. A Diaspora nationalist need not deny the centrality of Zion in Jewish thinking, but Dubnov insisted on the continuing validity of Jewish cultural centers in Europe and North America. Had he been alive in 1948, Dubnov might not have been one of the strongest proponents of the State of Israel, though his views could have changed under the influence of the Holocaust. Dubnov-Erich does not question whether anti-Semitic violence constituted a major challenge to Dubnov's outlook.

Among Russian-Jewish intellectuals, Dubnov was unusually receptive to modern Yiddish literature during its early decades. As a contributor to the Russian language periodical, *Voskhod*, under the pseudonym Criticus, he wrote important reviews of works by Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz. Subsequently, after exchanging letters with Sholem Aleichem, "Dubnov wrote an article for *Voskhod* on 'zhargon [i.e., Yiddish] literature,' in which he showed that the everyday language of the Jewish masses had an indisputable right to become an instrument of literature because trilingualism was imposed on Jews

by history" (p. 87). After 1907, he began to write some of his own works in Yiddish. He saw a direct correlation between language and social action when he noted that "the opponents of *zhargon* disdained a powerful instrument of Jewish autonomy in the Diaspora" (p. 150). Sholem Aleichem's letters to Dubnov "repeatedly emphasize that Criticus alone in Russian-Jewish journalism championed the rights of the poor *zhargon* and defended it from attacks" (p. 196).

Dubnov-Erlich devotes an important chapter to Dubnov's years in the Odessa literary circle (1890-1905). He became closely acquainted with S.Y. Abramovitsh, H.N. Bialik, Ben-Ami, Y.H. Ravnitsky, and Ahad Ha-Am. It was during this period that both modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish literature flourished. Odessa was the center of Hebrew publishing, while Warsaw — led by I.L. Peretz — was becoming the center of Yiddish culture. After the Czernowitz conference of 1908, which declared Yiddish a national language of the Jews, Ahad Ha-Am reproved Dubnov for his support: "I am not surprised at what you write . . . about *zhargon*. After all, it is a direct corollary of the theory of autonomy" (p. 200). By 1910, the author explains, "the disputes were no longer between nationalists and assimilationists but between Hebraists and Yiddishists" (p. 153). Dubnov tried to avoid this dispute, valuing Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish for their separate merits.

Like Bal Makhshoves (Isador Eliashev), Dubnov held a pluralistic view of Jewish literature. In a 1913 colloquium, he argued "that the linguistic dualism or pluralism of Jewish literature had existed in virtually every period, and that this ability of the national culture to use any instrument should be seen as one of its strengths" (p. 161). He saw "the unity of a culture ex-

pressed in various languages," corresponding to "the unity of a people scattered in the Diaspora." Neither the Hebraists nor the Yiddishists were satisfied with this pluralistic approach.

The publication of *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History* comes at an appropriate time in the history of Zionism. Dubnov argued against outright critiques of Jewish nationalism, by distinguishing "between aggressive and defensive nationalism, between national egoism and national individualism" (p. 112). On the other hand, his views suggest the complementarity of Jewish culture in Israel and in the Diaspora. Having rejected assimilation, Dubnov nevertheless considered European culture an invaluable part of Jewish life, and he viewed culture as the truest basis for national Jewish identity.

**Standing Again at Sinai** By JUDITH PLASKOW. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1990. 282 pp., \$21.95.

*Reviewed by* REBECCA T. ALPERT

THE MOVEMENT for women's equality in Judaism has presented an enormous challenge to the Jewish community over the past several decades. This struggle has resulted in changes in status for Jewish women never before contemplated in Jewish history. Women are now communal leaders. We teach Jewish Studies in graduate programs and seminaries. We have created and participated in life cycle ceremonies (baby namings and *b'not mizvah*) that never existed before. We take an active, public role in religious and communal life, and don

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REBECCA T. ALPERT is a rabbi and former Dean of Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She currently runs a program at Temple University for adults returning to school.



religious garb when we pray. We have challenged Orthodox hegemony in Israel through our insistence that we be able to pray publicly at the Western Wall. We have challenged unfair divorce laws and other legislation and practices that make a woman's status less than a man's. In all but Orthodox communities, our equality with men has been realized. Is there anything more that Jewish women could possibly want?

In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow suggests that there is, indeed, more that women want. Everything gained by Jewish women has been within a framework created by men and built around their needs. She describes the contradictions of women's pursuit of equal rights poignantly:

When a woman stands in the pulpit and reads from the Torah that daughters can be sold as slaves (Exodus 21:7–11) she participates in a profound contradiction between the message of her presence and the content of what she learns and teaches. (xiv)

The question that interests Plaskow is how might Judaism have been different if women had been given the opportunity to create Jewish law and custom, to envision Divinity, to tell the story of the Jewish people; in other words, to articulate what we want Judaism to be. Answering this question will not result in women having access to a male dominated Judaism, but in a transformation of Judaism that will change its meaning and content for men and women alike.

Plaskow's work weaves together elements of a feminist Judaism that she and others have been developing over the past decade. While she and her cohorts began their search asking questions about equality, the answers which they found led them to explore further. They have written midrash, reconceptu-

alized Divinity, spun new rituals, rediscovered Jewish women of past eras. *Standing Again at Sinai* captures the essence of these developments with great clarity and insight. Plaskow brings together the work of scholars like Paula Hyman, Chava Weissler and Rachel Adler, and poets like Lynn Gottlieb and Marcia Falk, into a coherent whole. This book is the first attempt to envision a feminist Judaism.

If *Standing Again at Sinai* were only a retrospective of the past two decades of the Jewish feminist search to go beyond egalitarianism, it would be a major contribution to our understanding of contemporary Jewish life. But the book is more than a synthesis of the work of Jewish feminists. Plaskow is presenting a systematic theology of feminist Judaism. Like other contemporary Jewish theologians, she examines and redefines the central categories of Jewish thought — God, Torah and Israel. Her use of this conceptual framework locates feminist Judaism at the center of Jewish theological debate today.

Plaskow begins her discussion with Torah, which she defines as the living memory of the Jewish people. Torah is identified as the Jewish past. Women have been a part of this past, but we have not played an active role in recording it. For women to reclaim Torah, we must redefine our past. Plaskow suggests three vehicles through which this search may take place — history, midrash and liturgy — and describes the prodigious accomplishments of Jewish feminists in pursuit of this goal.

This "Godwrestling" is key to the creation of a feminist Judaism. Access to Torah becomes an active process that requires both knowledge of what has gone before and an imaginative approach to reconstructing it. All Jewish life benefits from this kind of creativity and engagement with the Jewish past.



Plaskow sees a limited role for halakhah in her definition of Torah, and questions the role of law for a feminist recreation of Judaism. Ultimately, she quarrels less with a need for a legal structure, *per se*, than with the particular content and structure of halakhah as it has been constituted. A feminist approach would involve a shared communal process for the making of rules, rather than a code of law that can be altered, if at all, only by a few men. Yet Plaskow does not rule out the possibility of some day creating a Jewish feminist halakhah. For the current time, however, it is not her priority.

The separation of Torah and halakhah is a significant feature of Plaskow's definition of a feminist Judaism. To those for whom Torah and halakhah are synonymous, this will be a stumbling block to their appreciation of her analysis. To others, this distinction will be valued, pointing toward a redefinition of Torah that encompasses a more open and fluid understanding of the continuing process of revelation.

Plaskow sees Israel, which she defines as the Jewish community, as the connecting factor between God and Torah. The community is the locus of the Divine, the element that makes it possible for the memory of Torah to remain alive. The emphasis on community exists both in feminism and Judaism. In both worlds, collectivity is prized above individuality.

That does not mean that Jewish and feminist definitions of community are compatible. In fact, several factors make it difficult to reconcile Jewish and feminist concepts of community. Plaskow critiques the Jewish approach to community for its penchant for defining itself as over against an "other." Whether the other has been women, pagans or Christians, Jewish definitions of group identity have tended to-

wards dualism and exclusivity. While defining dichotomies is not inherently bad, Judaism has tended to hierarchialize those differences. (Shabbat, for example, is better than the other six days; light is better than darkness). This problem is most boldly illustrated by the concept of chosenness (i.e., Israel is better than the other nations), although not all will agree with her definition of what "chosenness" means in the Jewish tradition. Plaskow would prefer Jewish peoplehood to be based on our distinctiveness, not in judgmentally comparing ourselves to others. Not since Mordecai Kaplan eliminated the Chosen People Doctrine from his reconstruction of Judaism has the case against chosenness been articulated this strongly or clearly.

Plaskow takes the argument further than Kaplan does, suggesting that the dualistic, exclusive, hierarchical approach taken by Jewish tradition is also at the root of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but does not examine whether Islamic theology takes a similar approach.

In the chapter on God, she claims that she is merely finding new images and metaphors for God, not attempting a full philosophical reconceptualization. Yet, her suggestions for re-imagining God certainly point in the direction of a new God concept.

Many arguments for female God imagery and pronouns have been made by other Jewish feminists, and Plaskow summarizes them poignantly and coherently. She raises questions about the kind of anger and distress that the use of female pronouns and new images has evoked. She charges those who refuse to countenance new images and pronouns with idolatry — worship of male images and pronouns instead of God. She presents the challenge succinctly: either accept that when feminists change images and pronouns they are talking

about the same God of Israel in new ways, or presume the absolute maleness of God. Plaskow's argument should put to rest, once and for all, debates over the appropriateness of these creative endeavors.

But Plaskow is wrong when she asserts that new images do not make a new theology. The only way that we can speak of God's essential nature is through the images that we use to describe God. Therefore, feminist imagery does alter one's fundamental understanding of the Divine. When Plaskow refers to God as friend, lover and companion, and when she uses the images of fountain, wellspring, source and ground of being, she is emphasizing images which, while locatable in parts of Jewish tradition, have been largely undervalued in the way we think of God.

More important is Plaskow's assertion that it is alien to a feminist reconstruction of Judaism to image God primarily as a sovereign manipulating the world from outside it and above. Without these concepts, how can we refer to God as King, or even Ruler of the Universe? Plaskow is calling for a revolution in the way we approach our understanding of God. Intimacy is to replace sovereignty as a dominant metaphor. This will inevitably change our way of understanding ourselves as Jews and the way we exist in the world.

Plaskow is right in her assessment that Jewish feminist theology must deal with the problem of evil. She alludes only briefly to questions of pain, death and suffering. Questions of theodicy need a fuller treatment. It would be of great in-

terest to see how such issues are to be dealt with from a feminist perspective, and I hope that Plaskow or other Jewish feminists pursue these questions in future works.

As she points out, God, Torah and Israel are mutually reinforcing concepts. In her theology, she replaces a God who works outside of the world, imaged predominantly as male, who has revealed his Torah exclusively to his chosen people, with a non-hierarchical community that perceives a foundation/friend/mystery that, together, constantly reveal and evoke Torah, living memory. Plaskow follows in the tradition of Jewish theologians like Martin Buber and Mordecai Kaplan, who did not accept the mainstream understanding of the central concepts of Judaism. Her theology makes it possible for anyone who harbors doubts about the traditional system of Jewish beliefs to find a home in Judaism.

This past generation has, for the most part, ignored belief, preferring to express its connection to Judaism through communal affiliation and commitment to practice. Plaskow reminds us that belief is an important component of Jewish life and cannot be ignored. Her work challenges all Jews, regardless of affiliation or feminist convictions, to take theological questions seriously. Any course in contemporary Jewish theology that is taught in synagogues, seminaries or universities needs to include a thorough and serious consideration of Jewish feminist theology, and should include *Standing Again at Sinai* for a powerful statement of its views.

# *Meditations on the Prinzhorn Collection of the Art of the Mentally Ill, on Display at the Smart Gallery, Chicago, April 1985\**

JANET RUTH HELLER

Graduate students calmly take notes  
On the exuberant drawings,  
Sculptures, paintings, and textiles  
Of the irremediably insane.

Pohl draws his own head  
At awkward angles,  
Eyes bulging with the fear and anger  
That the rest of us try to hide.

Neter's landscape transforms itself  
Into a witch's head,  
The mother/wife/daughter  
That he could never control.

Karl Brendel sculpts wooden men  
Reduced to head, legs, and phallus  
By their mechanized lives.

"Little is known about the women patients,"  
The exhibitors helpfully inform us.  
Even Prinzhorn's 400-page monograph  
Merely classifies the women's artwork.  
They lack the professional credentials  
Of the male artisans.

Men portray themselves standing  
On a woman's crotch.  
But Elisabeth F.'s pencil captures  
A circle of chatting women,  
Some collapsing.

While a male patient fancies himself the Kaiser,  
Else Blankenhorn paints imaginary money  
To finance the resurrection of the dead.

Johanna Nathalie Wintsch embroiders a colorful sampler,  
Imposing decorative order  
On a Nazi world gone mad.

---

According to the catalog published for the travelling exhibition of these artworks (1984-5), they were made between the end of the 19th century and 1933 by persons, presumably adults, who had been institutionalized and were considered at that time to be insane. The collection was first brought together in Germany in the 1920s, and later augmented in the 1930s.

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JANET RUTH HELLER is Assistant Professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan.

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